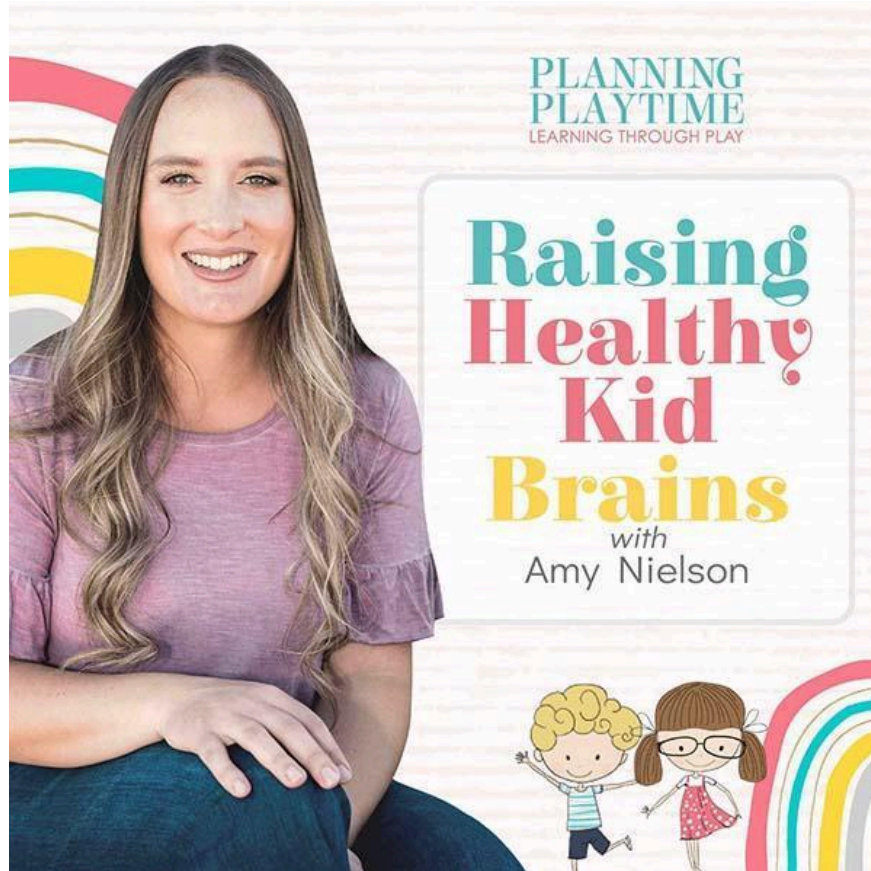


Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Amy Nielson

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Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

Has your child ever been afraid? Do they have a strong fear response, sometimes even when it's not necessary? This is something very common, and if it's happening to your child, it might be something going on with their amygdala.

Now, my guest today, Anna Housley Juster, is an amazing human with an incredible background. She holds a PhD in early childhood education, a master's in psychology, a master's in clinical social work. She has done some incredible things, including being a content director for Sesame Street. She has done amazing things and she has put out a book that I got and I love so much.

It's a children's book, a picture book called *How to Train Your Amygdala*. And it is something that is so cute and so fun and so playful that you could read it just as a picture book and absolutely just enjoy it as that. But there is some depth in this book and it is talking about this part of our brain and how it works, our alarm system in our brain and how it protects us from touching fire or walking in front of a car.

But also that sometimes it gets things wrong and sometimes it makes us really afraid of a sound or something happening when it really wasn't something we needed to be afraid about. And what's beautiful is in the book, you're playing with this amygdala, who's this soft, squishy, friendly monster. And he says, can you help me? Can you help train me so that I don't freak out when I don't need to? And so she includes in here some beautiful strategies for breathing techniques and different things. It's an incredible book.

So in our conversation today, we talked a little bit about the book. We also talked about the brain-body connection. We talked about ways to help children practice mindfulness and breathing in a context where it becomes a habit for them. So it's a natural response when they are getting into flight, fright, or freeze.

We also talked about play and we talked about how critical play is, but some ways to implement it into your day in 10 minutes, right? Do you have 10 minutes a day and some different ways that that can work depending on your family and your personality and how you play as an adult.

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

This conversation is super helpful and really interesting. I'm gonna encourage you to go listen to it. It's coming up right after this.

Welcome to the *Raising Healthy Kid Brains* podcast, where moms and teachers come to learn all about kids' brains, how they work, how they learn, how they grow, and simple tips and tricks for raising the most resilient, kind, smart, compassionate kids we can. All while having lots of grace and compassion for ourselves, because, you know what? We all really need and deserve that, too. I am your host, Amy Nielson, let's get ready to start the show.

Amy: Anna, welcome to the show. I'm so happy to have you here today.

Anna: Amy, it's so great to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Amy: Oh my goodness. I'm so excited and we're going to be talking about this book, which I love and I'm so excited about and all the things behind this. But before that, I usually ask people to tell me a little bit about how they got here. I was looking at your resume and you have some fun stuff on there, some impressive stuff, but like director of, what was it? Director of content for Sesame Street?

Anna: Yes. That is always going to be my claim to fame. I think no matter what else I do in my life, it was such a great place to work. I had wanted to work at Sesame Street. I didn't know when I was a child, it was called Sesame Workshop.

I'd wanted to work there since I was about nine or 10. So when I started working there, it was actually a dream come true and have fantastic friends and colleagues to this day. Yes, this is true. I used to work with Grover and Burt and Ernie and all the whole crew. Yeah.

Amy: That is so cool. Do you get lots of street cred from like your kids or your kids' friends for that?

Anna: Well, I have two teenage daughters. I don't get as much street cred for that now. It is an evergreen show. And sometimes one of their teachers will ask

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

them, what do your parents do or whatever? And my kids will inevitably say, well, my mom used to work at Sesame Street.

Now she does blah, blah, blah, blah. They like it. The teachers like it. And my older daughter, Alex, is now 18. But when she was a baby, eight months old, she was the baby on Elmo's World Beaches episode, which was fantastic.

Yeah. So we were at this cold beach in September in New Jersey filming that. She wasn't happy about it, but it was a really fun experience. Yeah.

Amy: That's pretty cool. That's really fun. Cool. So tell me a little bit like what led you to wanting to do because you've done so many things with children and brains, which is like where we like to nerd out a little bit here on the show. But tell me like how what led you to this? Like you talked about wanting to work as a child at First Destiny Street, right? But how did you get there?

Anna: Well, I love the name of your podcast and also planning for play because you're basically combining two of my very favorite things in the world. And that's been the through line. I don't have a typical linear career path. I think lots of people don't these days. The through line has always been working with children and therefore working with families because I don't think you can really work with children without working with their families.

And I've come at that through both formal and informal education contexts. Anything from, like, I helped to write the STEM curriculum for the kindergarten classrooms in the Boston Public Schools a few years back. I've worked on community effort to support self-directed play in the context of supportive adults, neighborhoods and communities. I'd done research on play and I was in children's media. And then when I was working at Boston Children's Museum doing a lot of work in communities, I was working with agencies that had a strong focus on social work.

And this was around the time that we were seeing really big increases in anxiety in the US and around the world. And I just got so interested in helping kids from that angle. So I went back and did my third graduate degree in clinical social work and am licensed as a practicing mental health clinician. And then I worked

[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

in community mental health for years and now run a private practice, but I'm constantly pulling back to my education days and doing teacher trainings. And now with this angle, I'm sort of basically where like developmental psychology meets mental health always through the lens of play.

Amy: I love it so much.

Anna: And that led me to the book because the book is came out of like all of the things I just said, basically.

Amy: Yeah, it's so good. Well, I love, as you know, I play speaks to my soul. This is such a core piece of what we, this is what my company is built on, right? And this idea, but I love that background you have kind of, of you have some teaching background or working, you know, in children in a teaching capacity. And then also, so there's this education side with the mental health side, because I feel like so many of our teachers right now are almost becoming forced to become like mental health, I don't know, not practitioners, but teachers and support people all day in the classroom.

And we're trying to give them social emotional curriculum. We're trying to expect them to teach all these things that maybe they don't even have all of the training and teaching for. And so, and as parents, hopefully we're starting to educate ourselves about this as well and be able to share this. And so this is of course a huge piece of why we do this podcast. So I'm just so happy about it.

I love this book. So I'm going to talk a little bit about the book, and then we're going to go through and just kind of talk about some of their stuff. But tell us about, like, so it's how to train your amygdala. Talk to me a little bit about what the amygdala is, and just, you know, so any of our listeners don't know and the role that that plays. And then, oh my gosh, everyone, you have to get this book.

It is so good. But yes, tell us about the amygdala a little bit and then we'll start there.

Anna: So I feel like it's the usual suspect of the threat response of the brain, right? Like anytime you, if anyone leaves this podcast and does a little quick Google search of the amygdala, you will see information and videos about the

[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

amygdala hijack. You will see a lot about the fight-flight-freeze response. And because it is an area of the brain, there's actually two, they're both almond shaped, they're in the core and the limbic system of the brain. So in like the feudal line straight back, like through your nose to the back there, it's back there.

And we need the amygdala to survive. Every human has one and many animals, including humans have an amygdala in order to survive. So without the amygdala, we would step into traffic. We would not sense danger. We might reach out and touch a fire. You know, they're all the things that we, we rely on our amygdala all the time.

In my practice with really young kids, I have kids as young as four years old saying the word amygdala because through the repetition and through the education, they start to learn, oh, this is what my amygdala does. And then this is when it can make mistakes.

And what happens is that in the book, which is driven by a character that is the amygdala talking directly to the reader about a third of the way through the book, it makes a mistake and realizes that cheapishly admits that sometimes it can be very sensitive and send us into fight-flight-freeze when in fact, there's no actual threat.

And so I think it's super important for adults to understand that because I made it through my pre-service teaching and two graduate degrees and was a parent for years before I actually understood this in myself, in my own threat response. And once I understood, it was like, everything made so much more sense and my whole mindset opened up and I felt more compassionate towards myself, to my children, to my husband, to like all the people that we can accidentally threaten or who we think are threatening us and many times they might not be. So we need the amygdala. It keeps us safe when there's actual danger. And then often it makes a mistake and it is the usual suspect for that process because even though the process involves the whole body and other areas of the brain and then the muscles and our heart pumping blood to get ready to fight or run away, it's triggered by early detection in the amygdala.

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

Amy: So good, I love this so much. Okay, so I'm thinking of this. On another episode, we kind of talked about the alarm system in the brain and how it impacts the stomach. So like the gut, you know, brain connection, right? And so we had kind of talked about the alarm system.

So I love that you actually like use that in the book. So my cute daughter, she's now in high school and no longer has this problem. But when she was a child, we couldn't get her to go upstairs to her room because she was so afraid of the sharks under her bed. Okay. So it's just like a two-story house, right?

The sharks under her bed were such a concern. There might be a shark under her bed, right? And so she wouldn't go upstairs, right? So this is one of those cases where there's the alarm system, maybe, and to whatever degree that's activated, but it became almost crippling to her in some respects, some of these fears that she had.

And so I love this idea of talking about this piece of our brain and not attacking it, because I think sometimes our response as parents is to be like, why are you afraid of that? That doesn't even make any sense. Like whatever, you know, we're just kind of like, this is silly, why are you being afraid? Right, but then instead having the language to say, oh my goodness, your amygdala is working right now. And your amygdala is so awesome, it's the solar system and it keeps you safe from these things, which is so good, right? But sometimes it's a little sensitive, right?

And it goes off, right? And then just giving them the language for that so that we're not hating on our brain because our brain's doing it. I don't even know how much control we have of it all the time but like noticing it's okay, this is a good piece. I love this part of my brain. Also, I just need to be aware that sometimes, you know, maybe it's going a little too much and here's some things I can do about it.

And you'd give strategies for that in things that kids can talk through, but also extra stuff in the back for parents to kind of have as toolkit to work with kids, which is so beautiful.

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

Anna: Yeah. You're saying that example of the sharks under the bed is really a strong example, because what would you want your brain to do if there was a shark when you were swimming in the water?

Amy: Oh, you would want to like, I don't know. I'd probably freeze, freak out. I don't know. Like you try to, what do you, you're supposed to hit him on the nose. I don't even know.

What do you do? Yeah, but yeah, you'd want to respond.

Anna: Initially you might freeze because that is one of the things that might your amygdala might have you do. You certainly wouldn't have great access to language, for example. So if someone came up to you in the water and said, Amy, tell me how you're feeling right now. Use your words to explain to me how you're feeling right now.

Amy: About the shark that's coming after me?

Anna: Get the heck away from me. Yes. We're both going to die if we sit here and talk about it. So there's no access to the language area of the brain. If you're really in this mode, you're either swimming as fast as you can away, or you're trying to actually fight back with anything you have.

And once you get out free of this mindset and realize that's not the best of the three options, you might be screaming, but you need to act. You don't stop to think about it. The challenge is that if your brain attaches to the idea that there's a shark under your bed, and obviously in this case, that's fictional, I think.

Amy: Yes.

Anna: You've let me know that there's no chance there was that actual shark under your doorstep. So then her brain is creating a false threat response. And maybe, I don't know if this happened to her, but that could have been making her heartbeat quickly. It could have been setting off, you know. There's also anxiety can start in the cortex. So not all anxiety.

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

So the amygdala is in charge of fast track anxiety. Right? So if she went upstairs and she saw something move, like she thought something moved, and suddenly her whole body and brain went into this threat response and she ran downstairs and said, I'm hid. There's a shark under my bed.

That might be that's the main flow working. If she's ruminating and telling you all day, hey mom, just so you know, later on tonight, there's no chance that I'm going in my bedroom because of the shark. That's less likely to be the threat response, quick, fast-track anxiety, and more likely to be rumination, intrusive thoughts, like something triggered. And now her heart might be beating, but it's a slightly different neurological body process. Either way, my hope is just that this book starts conversation about the fact that it isn't a bad part of you, and you don't need to banish it.

There's a lot of talk, which I think can sometimes be used to about fighting back against anxiety or like driving away a worry monster that's coming at you. In my experience, that's actually scary. Like that can be kind of anxiety provoking. And what I was trying to do is really look at this from an intentional standpoint of mindfulness, where we're not trying to fight against anything at all. We're trying to be connected, our body and our brain and work together, connecting brain and body, because the brain is part of the body.

We often say brain and body, but they're all, it's all one. I mean, the brain is in the body, right? It's all part and part of everything in our human self. So I want to think about this through the lens of collaboration, empathy, connectedness, rather than I'm going to fight back against something that I never want to be part of me again, because we need worry. And we need positive stress.

We need that system in our bodies and brain.

Amy: So good. I remember, I think the first time I kind of heard this concept, right, it was a number of years ago and explaining that, right, we have these pieces in our brain and they're serving us in different ways, right? And so it's not about trying to get rid of it, right? But maybe keep it within its like space, right? So if it's taking all the turns, right?

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

And it just steals the microphone and takes all the turns from all the other parts of our brain that are trying to talk, right, then it might need to just, we kind of have to be the manager and say, okay, you're amazing. We love you. Thank you. It's time someone else's turn to talk. Right.

And, and I love that because it felt like such a compassionate piece, right? We hear you like, is there something, I don't know, just being able to listen to the different parts of our brain when they're talking and whatever they're bringing up, right? But then also recognize that they have a space and allowing them to be in that space. I don't know. That was how it was explained to me at one point.

And that's been a very compassionate way, I think, to look at it for me. But I loved this because, yes, it was very much about... It's almost like your amygdala is a little friend. It's a little fuzzy friend in your book. I love the illustrations that you have for it and just acknowledging it and being grateful for it, right?

But also, oh, well, I can make mistakes, right? So here's how you can train me if that happens. And it's so good. Love it.

Anna: So Cynthia Cliff, who's the illustrator for the book, she did a fantastic job of capturing emotion because so much of this book is dependent on the facial expressions of those two kids that kind of are the sidekicks of the amygdala that are practicing the strategies. And I really wanted it to be clear what calm looks like, and then what it looks like on your face or what it could look like on your parents' face or even a teacher's face, if they are in threat response mode, like if they've hit their limit and gone into that mode, we needed the illustrations to clearly show feeling. And I think she did a brilliant job with that.

Amy: Yeah, so good. Okay, so we talked about the mind-brain connection. What else would you kind of encourage for parents as far as conversations? Because I think that is so much of what this is about and why books like this are so helpful because it allows us to kind of open up the conversation and start talking about those things. Do you have some like ideas for parents or teachers that are kind of trying to start having this conversation to introduce it or kind of talk about it with kids?

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

Anna: Yeah. So my hope is that as a picture book, it sort of stands alone as just a story first through the lens of play. And what I mean by that is that, as you know, play is both protective and therapeutic. And so the book is written in a playful way. I don't believe, and this is also going back to my days at Sesame, you can talk about hard things in playful ways. It doesn't have to feel didactic and sad, basically.

And if it does, it's probably not gonna be as effective. Right? So I want it to be playful and just a story that ends up teaching you some strategies along the way and has the psychoeducation aspect of what's happening in your brain. So my hope is that someone picks it up and reads it with the child because it's a book to read.

And that as you're going through it, you're like, oh, okay. Like, yeah. Like, so even the adult, I've heard from adults that they buy it for their children or grandchildren because it's a picture book and then realize for the first time in their lives, they could be 70, that they have an amygdala that acts and that that knowledge explains some of what they may have been managing their whole lives. So I hope it's just the story first. That's my preference.

Amy: I love that because I think that's exactly what it was. I know we'd talked to your team was sending it to me. There had been some time I think between that had happened and when it arrived and I get books sometimes. So I had gotten the book and I was just looking at it. I was like, "Oh, this looks fun."

I didn't even realize. But then I was thinking, "Oh, this looks cool." And I know what the amygdala is. Right. So anyway, it's such a fun story and a fun illustration.

So I think it totally does that. And isn't that so cool that we can be grownups and still be learning about our brains? And there's almost some grace in that, I think, when we're talking to kids about that, that we're still learning and it's okay that we don't know everything when we were little and we're still just growing together and being able to have those kinds of conversations.

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

I love that you included the piece, you have breathing exercises in there and it's kind of opens up this idea. You know, I don't know if, like we talk about like telling kids mindfulness, you know, and talking all about mindfulness is gonna probably go a little bit this way, right?

But when you're doing breathing exercises and you have like fun, like ones that they can do that are kind of playful, like, you know, doing the figure eight, right? Or drawing things on their fingers while they're breathing and it gives them like a playful kind of way to do it. Talk to me about that and the value of that in teaching kids that early.

Anna: I really do think that the earlier, the better. I don't say that for all things, but I think it has to become a practice because if you are a classroom teacher and a child is in the middle of a, they're in threat response mode and they're hiding under a desk or they're about to run out of the classroom or they're fighting and kicking, biting, and someone goes up to them, close to them and says, hey, it's okay, just take a deep breath. Most of the time, I would like to talk to people where that's worked, because I'm fast. I think once it's a practice, it might, but if you're already deep into threat response mode, the only way these things really work is if they've become a practice when you are calm, when you could use the other areas of the brain. So I think the earlier, the better.

And the key is for adults to do the practice first. Because if you introduce any strategy to a child and they're so intelligent, they know if you buy into this strategy and they know if you don't. And if you have played with that child and followed that child's lead in play, and you have trust, and you have that language of play, the consistent language across languages for children, they will listen to the practices that you model and offer to them. And then if they have them when they're young, they just stay with them their whole lives. I don't think there's a too early or too late time to start these practices.

Amy: So, so true, I think.

Anna: At any time in life, but I am sitting here saying this to you today on this podcast, and I promise you that I don't always practice this. It's also not a perfect practice. It's something that you would commit to with intent, and then you

[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

basically forgive yourself and do your best. And then forgiveness is where I come back to Brene Brown and I talk to people all the time, like if you make a mistake and you know, it's not about shame, it's about regret, and you can always come back to the thing. I'm really sorry I yelled at you.

I know that probably scared you. And what I wish I had done is I wish I had tuned into realizing that my amygdala thought that I was threatened and it was trying to protect me. And when I was trying to protect myself, I was really hard on you. The healing that comes through that also by recognizing what's happened in your body and expressing it out to a child can be really positive.

Amy: So good. Yeah, I love that. I wonder, so you're talking about like the time to do all this teaching how to do mindfulness is not in the moment when we are not able to really get there, have big conversations about it. It's not we're trying to tell people how to fight off sharks when the shark is coming or whatever, right?

How do we do that, right? If we're trying to teach children as a practice to do breathing or whatever. I feel like when I'm talking about it, maybe I'm doing this wrong. I feel like it's often we're talking about like, when you're having stress or when you're doing this, then you do this, right?

But if we're doing it that way, then maybe we're not getting them into the practice of doing it, you know, so it's just becomes a habit and something they're doing all the time. So do we just kind of, is it better to kind of just do mindfulness or breathing exercises at a regular kind of interval or when we're reading books like this or things like that, instead of waiting until maybe it's a moment that you actually would need it?

Anna: I mean, ideally, I think that the practice has become such practices like brushing your teeth and treating your child when they're in, like that you're just modeling, Like, oh my gosh, most stressful situation just now. I think I need to just take a moment and be calm and calm myself. So it's not that you're necessarily directly, because as we know, kids learn all behaviors in the context of relationships and they can relearn behaviors in the context of relationships. So modeling the strategy in a way that's genuine, like not fakely monitoring it,

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

but like just modeling it in a way that's genuine goes a long way in showing that that's something you value. You're attaching high value to that.

And then it's most likely that a child might follow along. Another great way to do this is with stuffed animals, the displacement of something onto it. I have about 40 stuffed animals in my office and I have kids like just like their part of their therapy is to lay on a big, comfy couch with all of them on top of them and just feel the weight as we breathe. So I do the overt strategies. But I think in addition to teaching them directly, they need to be modeled and valued the same way we would value other aspects of life.

And the hope is that over time, a behavior becomes a habit. And once it's a habit, it's part of who you are.

Amy: It's part of your identity. Yeah. I love that. And I like how you kind of related it to brushing your teeth. It's just something you could do at night, you know, when you're kind of, you know, you read a story or you brush your teeth or whatever your bedtime routine is.

And then just adding in this, like maybe a little bit of breathing, you know, talking about the day and a little bit of breathing or something. So you're kind of building it in just as a regular practice. That's something that's happening all the time.

But then I feel like if from that context, if you've been doing something like that, it's going to be so much easier to go to that space when they're feeling stressed during the day. And you can say, "Oh, I think we should do one of our breathing things" that they are already so familiar with and already know.

Then I feel like that would be so much more natural maybe to get to that place.

Anna: Definitely and the idea is that actually, if you do this as a practice over time, you architect the brain towards this practice, right? So it's like you can, if you, that's a trauma history or just an organic predisposition to anxiety that means that the threat response is going to happen quicker in one child maybe than in another. And we know that through this type of practice you can actually reduce the chronic stress and you can increase the capacity for this type of behavior that actually changes the way the brain is wired. So you may end up

[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

less likely down the line to go immediately into threat response mode when there isn't an actual threat. Like that tendency will be reduced through the practice.

And if there's a parent listening who has a really anxious child that gets anxious at night, like about sharks under the bed or something, and you've read the book, basically what happens in the book is that the amygdala asks the reader for help. Something else that might ask for help is a favorite stuffed animal. That's like right there in the room. Or so you could put it on to a favorite stuffed rabbit or teddy bear and say, looks like it's a family anxious about going to sleep tonight. What can we do to help her feel better?

And then the child is practicing the strategy, but for the stuffed animal. And that's sometimes easier as like an entrance point than going right into the self. So, I mean, I'm a big fan of pretend play. I always have been. It's not for all parents.

It's completely fine. The most important thing about this is to figure out what feels comfortable in yourself. What is your play? As the adult, what brings you joy? Typically, if we are truly at play, like in the zone and flow of play, it's very unlikely that our amygdala is escalated and in threat response mode because they just cancel each other out.

Like animals in the wild will play freely to practice how to keep each other safe. They practice a lot of what they need for life in that play. They would not be doing that if there was a perceived predator, right? Like we shut down our play when we think we're in threat response mode. And contrary to that, if we are playing, it's very calming to the threat response.

So yeah.

Amy: I love that. So it almost sounds like it builds on itself, right? So if our amygdala maybe is going off more and more and more, it can set itself off easier. And that maybe if we are doing practices to help train it, right, that it is less likely to get triggered when it shouldn't be, right? Which is healthy.

And obviously it's going to trigger either way during the critical times, like if you're about to step in front of a car or something like that, right? Or touch a fire.

[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

Yeah, so I love that. And then the whole idea of play and all the beautiful things that it does, right? It does that laughter, I think it is, and we've talked about this, right?

And on the show many times, right? It's so hard to be creative when you're in, like it's essentially impossible, I think, to be creative when you're in flight or freeze. I think my words are leaving me right now. But if you can, I feel like laughter, just like you said, it just cancels the other one out? It just really kind of like releases all of the tension somehow and just brings you back to a kind of more neutral space that you can work from again.

So that was interesting that you brought that up. Do you have recommendations then for parents? So you talked about practices around the mindfulness and making that more of a common thing. Do you have recommendations for play for people? Because that seems like a big thing for you that we encourage.

How do we help children or parents play more with kids so that that's just another piece of helping children feel safer more of the time and helping their amygdala work properly?

Anna: Well, the first thing I would say is it doesn't take a lot of time in each day. Like I know many parents are very busy. If you're a teacher and a parent, which is true for a lot, a lot, a lot of people listening to this podcast. It's very hard. It's just incredibly busy life. And the net benefit, take down the line is exponential for short periods of time.

So when I do work with kids in my practice, I always involve parents a lot with many touch points with parent sessions to try to coach them and how to help their kids. I'll often say like, it's as little as 10 minutes, but it's time when you are following the child's lead and that will change in what they're doing based on their age.

So if it's a four or five year old and they are playing with toys and you have the 10 minutes when you're not cleaning up or working with another child on homework or doing something else to just simply sit next to them. If you don't like sitting on the floor, invite them onto the couch, you know, like, or sit on the

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

couch next to them and they're on the floor and just observe what they're doing without judgment or without inserting yourself to change what they're doing.

Let the child be self-directed in their play, observe, and if they look up at you and they're sort of inviting you in, you might engage in parallel play. You might sit and play with something next to them. That is extraordinarily soothing to the brain. That bond that you're creating just by attuning to what they're doing and doing it with them sort of by their side or if they invite you to be a to be participating, great. Do that.

It's a short period of time. It goes a long way in developing the trust so that down the line, if you hope to teach them a breathing strategy or you want them to come to you and say, the reason I was just so angry is because X happened at school today. To get there, I believe you really need to have connected in their language, which for that age group especially is the language play. And then I help parents understand we never grow out of our need to play.

So if you have a 14 year old who isn't necessarily sitting on the ground playing with toys, but they love something, a recording artist, a sport, whatever they love. Sports are tricky because it becomes so performance-based. It can create more anxiety than anything else a child does. But try to find ways to connect with them in a joyful way through the thing they love, following their lead. Because when they know that you trust them, that you would follow their lead and connect in that way, it creates a lot of more openness.

And so, and again, it doesn't have to take a lot of time, but I was running in New York City the other day, past a bench near Central Park, and there was a guy and his son, I presumed, sitting on the bench. The guy was looking at his cell phone down like this, and with the exact same angle in the child's body, he was examining a leaf, because it's falls leaf. So he's staring at the leaf, curious about it, and his dad is staring at his own cell phone.

And I was like, it was all I could do not to run back. Wait a second. Stop. I just want, like, this is such a missed opportunity, like, for the joint visual attention, which is in toddler years is how kids are learning language, right? Like to look at the same thing together just for 10 minutes is healing. It's foundational and then

[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

leading to when you might offer a strategy like some of the strategies that are offered in the book.

Amy: So good. Okay, I love this piece. And I think giving people different options. So I grew up with a mother who was so playful and I credit her with so much of who I've become and why I do what I do, right? So I feel like most of our life is play.

It's just like it built into everything that we do, but not everyone is my personality and willing to just be goofy and silly and whatever as a grown adult person. And that's okay. But so we talk about this, you know, and I love what you said, right? It's sometimes just so short, but some of the ideas that I've thought, you know, if it is sitting next to them and just kind of watching, engaging if they let you, but are there other ways?

So for example, for a while, you know, with my children when they were growing up and my ex-husband would be gone for work and he would come home and I would just say, "Hey, let's have just like 10 minutes when you get home, that's like just dedicated playtime that you have with these little kids that are, you know, growing up."

And so he said, "Okay, and we're going to do that." And then the kids knew it was their scheduled 10 minutes a day, right. To just play with that. And they were in charge of it. So they got to plan what they were going to do.

And they would look forward to that all day and like be planning what they were going to do. Does that give kind of some of the similar, if it's maybe a little more planned, the child's deleting but it's a little more planned, is that something that's still providing some of that same value as opposed to just coming and sitting next to them and following what they're doing?

Anna: Most definitely, because I think what you're saying is that you provided, so I think adults need to provide the seeds. You're basically planting the seed because you're giving the idea and you're saying this is the time and you're also giving permission. And you're basically saying, I'm turning over this, the direction

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

to you, you get to plan it out. That's sometimes what people need to do. If they have very scheduled lives, like a lot of kids have a lot of activities.

And sometimes I'll say you actually have to, like you said, plan for play, but it's more of an adult exercise because if we gave kids permission, they would do this all day long, right? Like this is their world, this is what they do. But if you make the time first, allow it to happen, and you do that enough times, you can then build habits. And then the child might, it might be easier for that to happen without it feeling as planned. But basically what I'm saying is however you get there, try to make the time for it.

And it's not just about the time, it's about the permission and maybe the materials.

Amy: Let me ask you this question then, because I grew up in a house that didn't even have a toaster. So we had like no technology, right? There was no TV, no video games, and we did have some board games and we played a lot in the dirt, right? In contrast, right? I was married to someone and married to someone again who has played video games in the past.

So the kids have played some of those. They enjoy them. They think they're really fun. I, of course, feel strongly about limits around that and making sure we're getting in the things in our life that we want in there. But sometimes the kids really, really, really want to go play this like group game with, you know, four or six people, right?

And they want mom and dad to play. And it is the most fun because mom is horrible at video games, right? And they can all beat me. I'll beat them in all the strategy games, but they can beat me in these, right? And they wanna come and they wanna save me or take me out or whatever, right?

Anyway, but they want to do this. Do you think there's value in that? Because I know we kind of like to hate on screens and hate on video games, but is there any value ever in group playtime that is on a screen? What do you think about that? I'm very curious about your opinion about that.

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

Anna: I think for all the reasons you just said, it's fine. It's fantastic actually, especially if that's the way that the child is inviting an adult into their world. What you just described doesn't really concern me at all, especially if those kids and other aspects of their lives are also engaging their brains in different ways.

The thing about a video game is that there's an algorithm built in. Someone else created that. So there's only so far you can push the limit of the game. A lot of games are very addictive because you can actually push it and push it and push it and push it and you keep getting exactly the reinforcement at each level that your brain wants.

But what you just described is also social. It's funny, because you're making mistakes and you're basically giving your kids a chance to be in the expert seat and have power. A lot of anxiety comes from, and threat response can go up, when we feel out of control and that we don't have agency and power, which makes sense because it feels totally out of our control. When a child's playing a video game and they have mastery and you don't, they have power. It's virtual power, but it's still power. And I think that's important. And I think it's fine. I think it's playful and fun.

That is very different what you just described, even if you weren't in there and it was just your kids playing with kids in other houses or kids I work with that play with kids in other countries. You're playing all over the world practically. You have to watch out because you don't actually know who you're playing with. This would be an example of a possible real threat that wouldn't be a pretend threat. So we have to be careful about that.

All of that is better for me than a single child alone playing a video game for countless hours a day. So I think as with everything in media, it is rarely the thing itself, unless a child is exposed to violence, pornography, the kind of things that kids can come across through screen use these days that we never ever want them to see. If it's just use of content that's been safely created for them, it's not the thing itself that's the problem.

It's when it becomes a coping strategy that's used over and over and over again because it takes the place of other strategies and other outlets for their creative

[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

energy to produce something versus to consume something. So it's nuanced. It's not, unfortunately, there isn't a perfect answer when we talk about screen use, but I encourage all the parents I work with and teachers that I work with to think about it as like the child and the content and the context. Like, what are all of those things and what do you think needs to happen? It's not one size fits all.

Amy: Yeah. I think that's so true. Right. And, oh, there's so many pieces of that. We could talk about that all day, but that was really good. I was just curious about that because sometimes I sit there and my acute mom was very, very anti any kind of video games or whatever. I sit there and I think, oh, this actually feels kind of healthy in small doses in this group context. And I, of course, if I'm going to buy a game or something, I want to get something that's like, okay, how many people can play this at once? So we can have it be like...

Anyway, and when all these people are giggling, and we even had this this last week, two of the girls were climbing on dad's shoulders and stacked on top of him, trying to keep him from being able to use his control. It becomes this giggling, fun... Anyway, and yeah, that feels like a form of play. What I wanted to just show in this piece is there's different ways to do it depending on how your brain works. There's always a way to reach and play with your children.

And I think the really important piece is to do it regularly. It doesn't have to be a lot of time, small like 10 minutes, like you said, right? But doing it as a habit, building that as a habit so that kids know that that's how your family works. It's such a coping mechanism. I tell people laughter and teasing and joking is our coping mechanism.

It's our top one that we use for everything because when hard things happen, it just is our number one way to just kind of bring it back to, okay, we can function, we're gonna be okay, and then we'll move forward from there. But anyway, so I love that. We are like out of time. This has been such a good conversation. I just wanna ask you before we go, do you have any other top takeaways or last minute things that you wanna share with our listeners before we leave?

Anna: Well, I would say that it's never too late to learn about your own brain. Neuroscience is catching up with other science and all of science is always

[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

catching up with human development. So this is an ongoing process. But if you learn about how your brain works, you will understand the threat response in yourself. And you'll understand why it might come up, even when you're talking to your child, whom you love, like more than anything in the world.

And the book is a tool within that space. I hope if people do read it, it's helpful in that and becomes a catalyst for conversations and future play time or future ways to communicate. It's never too late to understand more about why we feel the way we feel and what's happening in our brains and bodies.

Amy: It's so liberating, I think, to even as adults to understand this is why my brain does it. Like you said, you know, someone you just pick up this fun book and you're reading it and then you figure out, oh my word, my brain's been doing this. Oh my gosh, it makes so much sense. And anyway, and then I loved to bring in your stuff, and all the things. There are so many things we talked about today that are so helpful.

This has been so good. And everyone go get this book. This one, I have my special bookshelf. That's the one that is like out and this is on it right now, right? There's the closet upstairs for the many, many books that I have, but this one's out, right?

It's a really good one. Such a good way to start a conversation with kids and even help adults, right? Like be able to put into words what's going on in their brain and understand that better, which is so beautiful. Thank you so much for coming on today and sharing your wisdom with us and telling us about this book and for putting this out in the world for us all to learn more.

Amy: Thank you so much for having me, Amy. So much fun.

Don't you just love all the fun things we're learning on this show together? Well, we wanted to give you a chance to practice a little bit of it at home. And so we made you a special freebie just for being a listener here. You can grab it at PlanningPlaytime.com/special-freebie.

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[Raising Healthy Kid Brains](#) with Amy Nielson of Planning Playtime

Ep #92: Taming Your Brain's Alarm System: The Amygdala Explained with Anna Housley Juster

dot markers with it. You can use Q-tip painting. You could use circled cereal. There's all kinds of options. You can print it out today and get started. Just head over to PlanningPlaytime.com/special-freebie, and we'll send that to you right away.

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