

Sharon Podcast

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Hello, and welcome back to the Diverse Thinking, Different Learning podcast. I'm happy that you're here with us today, and I hope that you're having a great day. Today, we have a very special guest who has dedicated her career to pioneering inclusive education for children of all abilities.

Joining us is Sharon Lowry, the director and founder of Smart Start Developmental Learning Center. With over 39 years of experience in special education, Sharon is a true leader in the field. She founded Smart Start back in 1992, driven by her passion for creating a learning environment where every child is not just included, but thrives.

Today, we're diving into what it means to be a fully inclusive educational environment, the unique benefits it offers to all children.

[Sharon Lowery's]

Millions of kids struggle with learning, processing, and social-emotional difficulties. These challenges interfere with their ability to reach their full potential. Dr. Karen Wilson is here to help. Her extensive background in pediatric neuropsychology and higher education have prepared her for this unique mission. Listen as she delivers content to inform, educate, and empower parents and educators. This will enable you to identify challenges that kids face and get them on the road to achieving their full potential.

This is Diverse Thinking, Different Learning by Child Nexus.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Welcome to the podcast, Sharon.

[Sharon Lowery's]

Thank you so much for having me.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

I am so glad you're here, and I'm grateful to Arlene Bell for connecting us. So, thanks to Arlene, if you're listening. Thank you so much for connecting Sharon and I.

I'm so glad that we're having this conversation, especially at the beginning of a new academic year. That's right. And, you know, parents have made decisions about educational placements for their kids.

Some are still searching, and some are thinking about, you know, where they are right

now and maybe what they're considering for the next academic year. And just the whole idea of inclusive education comes up over and over again with families that I've spoken to. And when people hear inclusive education or diverse educational programs, they have different ideas on what that means and what that might look like.

And I'd love to hear from you in terms of your thoughts on what does a fully inclusive academic environment look like and how is that different than traditional education settings? Let's start there. Sure.

[Sharon Lowery's]

So, for us, a fully inclusive academic environment means that all children with all learning differences and styles are welcome. And we would use a term that isn't really used much anymore, or I would use a term that's not really used much anymore, which is reverse mainstreaming, which is traditionally we started our program. I started the program in 1992, so a long, long time ago, and it was a segregated program.

But then we opened it up in the year 2000 to include all learners. So, we are an academic and inclusive environment with a focus on kids with learning differences, but all children are welcome. And we are a developmental program, which leads to the ability to meet the individual needs of children who have learning differences in ways that are different than, say, a traditional preschool or a general education elementary program.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. And when you think about traditional educational settings who say that they're also inclusive, how does a fully inclusive program like yours differ from traditional settings that might have, like, a push-in services or pull-out services and things like that?

[Sharon Lowery's]

Yeah. I think, foundationally, we are a therapeutic program, and so I would say that's the most significant difference. So, the curriculum choices that we have made and the way that we adapt the model of education, the way we integrate kids who have sensory challenges, that is the foundation of our program.

So, we are set up to integrate kids with more significant needs as well as kids who don't have those same challenges because, foundationally, we are a therapeutic program. And I would say that's the most significant difference.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. And so, you're a therapeutic program and you're meeting the needs of all the kids who come into your program. And I know that we spoke initially, you talked about how,

you know, your perspective on educational environments really changed when you thought about the relationship-based model and particularly Dr. Stanley Greenspan's developmental relationship-based model. And how did that understanding shape your view of what an educational environment could look like and should look like?

[Sharon Lowery's]

Yeah, that's a great question. So, my background, which I shared with you initially, was as an ABA therapist. And I had the privilege, and I consider it a really significant privilege, of working with Dr. Ivar Lovas when I was at UCLA. And for those of you who don't know, he was the first person to begin to apply behavior modification techniques with clients, children, students, because they were in all different backgrounds with an autism diagnosis. So, that was my ABA background. In an ABA background, you are not taught any forms of development.

You aren't taught any stages of how children learn. You are applying ABA principles to an academic setting. So, that's how we started the program.

But I did see some very significant challenges. And then I began to surround myself with people who were more developmentalists. And then I was introduced to the work of Dr. Stanley Greenspan. And he was a child psychiatrist. And he would say that he studied healthy development, and then how were the neurobiological challenges that he saw the children experiencing, how were they impacting their ability to meet their developmental milestones? So, that was an aha.

Because in education, we think we need to always be focused on the stages of development. And the ABA model is not suited, I don't personally believe, to education because you don't study children from a developmental perspective. You have a set of rote programs that you're going to use for your kids.

So, when you're using a developmental model, you are looking at the unique needs of each individual child. And that's why it's ideally suited to inclusion. Because you have children with the most significant needs, all the way up to your gifted learners.

And how can you meet the educational needs of such a diverse population? And it's through understanding the ages and stages of development, and then the social-emotional milestones that Dr. Greenspan focused on are really your window and your ticket in.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

And how is that integrated? So, if a parent is saying, this sounds wonderful, which it does, what does that look like in the classroom setting when you have this relationship-based model? You're taking into consideration the development of each child.

So, if a parent is looking at a classroom and seeing kids at particularly different developmental stages, what does that look like for those children in the classroom, in terms of their experience?

[Sharon Lowery's]

It looks like a very traditional educational environment. But what the difference is, most of the families will say, my goodness, the kids look really happy. They also look relatively, because no child should be calm all the time.

But they look focused and attentive. And we serve some very significantly impacted kids. But it looks like a traditional setting because the curriculum we're using is a general education curriculum.

The preschool program, because we have a preschool program and an elementary program, the preschool program, it's set up, the environment looks like just a really inviting preschool environment. The difference is that there is a much more intentional focus on understanding the unique needs of your children, understanding that when you have behavioral challenges, there is 99.9% of the time an underlying sensory cause for that. And that's true for a child who may be on the spectrum, but it's also true for a child who may have more of attentional focal issues.

And even our gifted kids have some unique learning needs when they're preschoolers, because you really are wanting to focus on their emotional development. So the most significant difference is that focus on those three areas, which is understanding the developmental ages and stages of where your students are, understanding their unique sensory profile and how to meet their sensory needs within that classroom setting. And then also understanding what Dr. Greenspan would say, your EQ, your emotional quotient drives your intellectual quotient. So there is an intensive focus on building the emotional intelligence of our children. And that is also something that's unique to Dr. Greenspan's work is that focus on building emotional intelligence.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. And that emotional intelligence piece really speaks to how kids, you know, take in information in their environment, interact with each other in order to develop socially, develop emotionally. And again, it also speaks to their ability to be self-aware and to self-regulate, which primes them for optimal learning at the same time.

[Sharon Lowery's]

Exactly. And so Dr. Greenspan had his six social-emotional milestones, and they tied directly into the development of all children, but really being able to understand that zero to three months a child's working on, say, regulation, that's their primary focus. And so when you have a three-year-old, a four-year-old, a six-year-old, a ten-year-old, and

they are dysregulating under certain circumstances, it gives you a roadmap of, okay, so we need to be working on regulation.

So we're going to be focused more on how to support their body's ability to regulate in more challenging situations. So it does lead to the ability to understand how are we going to teach that emotional intelligence when we have the ability to look in and say, okay, these stages of development are missing, so it doesn't make sense to have an expectation that that child's going to be able to navigate their social environment at whatever age until you do some more foundational work with them.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. And, you know, when you think about kids in terms of their own social-emotional developmental trajectory, their cognitive developmental trajectory, and even their academic, you know, they're all in different places. And you talked about early on about being involved in segregated programs where kids who are neurodivergent, who had sensory, specific sensory needs, were in separate programs, or maybe it's a special day class, and they're separated from their typical developing peers.

Are there benefits, or what maybe you can help identify some of the key benefits of an inclusive education program for typically developing children and for those who are neurodivergent when in some academic environments we're still separating them?

[Sharon Lowery's]

Yeah. So for our kids with special needs, I think it's more obvious what those, what the benefits of being in an inclusive setting are. I think one of the things that's often not really spoken about is that children do learn from each other.

And when they're younger, and in the preschool ages, you have kids who are motor models. And so it's not just social-emotional models, it's a motor model. So you are going to be able to access your typically developing students.

So let's say you're going to do an obstacle course. Well, we're going to have one of our typically developing students or somebody who has a higher level of functioning go first. So that little friend can watch somebody who is their size and do a map what they're doing.

So then when they get up, they're going to be more successful. So there are obviously also lots of benefits from having a child who has more social-emotional capacities that they can then reach back and stick with one of their friends who needs a little support in staying engaged, and maybe a two-way interaction or a two-way communication. And that is something that is really focused on at the school on how to be a good friend.

And citizenship is really important to us because we want kids to really understand their

place in the world and that they are there to be kind to one another, to be accommodating of everybody's differences. And so we know within the special education community, many of the children have splinter skills. So they're going to be areas in their development that they're really excellent at.

And so it's always great for a teacher to remind if somebody is getting frustrated with a friend, hey, yeah, that is something that they're working on and this is the way you can support them. But remember, they're really good at reading and that's something you're still learning. So maybe next time when you're called up for reading, you could ask them to come up with you and help you with your reading.

So just being able to bridge and partner with them. For our traditional neurotypical, whatever the euphemism is that we want to use because it changes and being respectful of all of the children. I think the obvious advantages to inclusive education is that we want to build an understanding of differences because as a parent, we want our kids to be kind and loving and not think of special education students the way I'm 61.

So in my school, there weren't kids with special needs. They were at a segregated site or we know it's very common still for kids to be in different parts of the school and maybe just integrated for assemblies or at lunchtime. So we want our kids to not have any thoughts and the kids that are raised at our school, because some of them started to and then graduate in fifth grade, they don't actually really even have thoughts about their friends.

It's like, oh yeah, he doesn't speak without using a device. And so there really isn't a thought about it. But there is also great advantages to having a really dynamic curriculum that is focused on because as human beings, we all have different areas of our learning that are of greater challenge to us.

So you have educators and therapists who are really dialed into each of our students and helping them across all areas of their own development and their own educational journey. And I think that that has been really beneficial. And I think another population that we have really had a lot of success with is the gifted population because their learning journey often as preschoolers, there's some differences that have caused parents to be concerned a little bit.

Sometimes there may be worries that there are delays, but in fact, it's giftedness. And their focus on building their emotional intelligence and the perspective of others is a huge, huge component of their education that helps them have greater understanding that they have gifts for sure, but they also have opportunities to learn how to be more integrated within their peer groups so that they have connections with them beyond their incredible intelligence.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. And I think you've just beautifully outlined all the benefits and the uniqueness of an inclusive education programs. And it seems that there are benefits to everyone who is in them.

And if you think about it from the social emotional learning perspective, you're fostering, you talked about citizenship, you know, empathy, understanding, and appreciation of learning differences is really significant. And I think it's something that more and more parents are looking for because there's an increased understanding that we're all different and we all have unique, you know, needs and strengths and areas where we need additional support and normalizing that for young people is a gift that you're really giving them as they grow in their lives.

[Sharon Lowery's]

Yeah, absolutely. And it's spectacular to have the privilege of serving children from the time they were two or three when they entered our program and when they're graduating and watching their growth into general education, watching them launch into settings that were really unthinkable when you saw mostly behavioral manifestations at age three. And just this is something that was really beautiful that happened a few weeks ago.

I had two little gals who were graduating, so fifth graders, rising sixth graders. And one of the little gals got her first period at the school. And I saw the two with their heads together and I happened to be walking by, I said, everything okay?

And she said, oh, she got her period. Her friend said that. And her friend had gotten her period a few weeks, I mean, a few months prior to that.

And I said, oh, okay. All right. Well, do you have some supplies with you?

No, I don't. And her friend said, I have some in my cubby. So she was able to get her the supplies.

These are two girls who came in with very significant autistic-like symptoms who are warm, related, connected little gals who are preteens at this point. And it was a beautiful moment for me, first of all, to have gone from changing diapers to our little gals getting their first periods, which is in and of itself quite a spectacular transition. But it was a beautiful friendship moment.

And they were both super calm and regulated. When I called the mom to share with her, she was not calm or regulated by any stretch of the imagination. Oh, my goodness.

Oh, my goodness. Is she okay? Yep.

She's great. Her friends supported her. And it was truly one of those hallmarks for me as

an educator to see not only academically are we meeting their needs, but social, emotionally, it was a beautiful moment.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. And I think that really speaks to the environment that you've created for these young people where they feel safe, secure, and connected. And we know that connection has such a powerful impact on the mental health of all of us.

Yes. And that is really key. It really stood out to me when you're telling that story.

And then also you describing the environment, that ability to connect to peers and connect to educators is so critical for building resilience and for, again, like I was saying, for mental health.

[Sharon Lowery's]

Absolutely. And we had some issues this year with our older elementary students with some perceptions of bullying. And, you know, we are a small program and, oh, my goodness, that just, you know, my backbone got really straight.

Like, oh, I don't think so. Caught in this environment. But what it was really a great indication for me and then to be able to drive the support the educators need is there is misperception of what was going on.

And it told me that the person who was perceived as bullying needed more work in his understanding of his social-emotional communications and how it was being misinterpreted. So I was like, okay, we've missed some steps with him. And he's launching out into a new program starting in the school year.

And so it was, okay, we've got to really look at these things and make sure that we are building their ability to understand the perspective of others and understanding their own communication and how they are perceived so that when they're in a less supported environment, they can have an understanding of their own communication style and how they will need to navigate meeting new people and the perceptions of how they choose to connect with other peers.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. And again, another example of being in tune to the unique needs of students, right, and how that can impact them not only in your educational setting, but as they step outside of that setting as well. Now, when I think about fully inclusive, you know, academic environments and, you know, when you have, you know, typical developing kids, some parents might worry that the presence of kids with learning and thinking differences could affect their child's ability to learn, or maybe because teachers are

spending more time addressing the needs of neurodivergent students that that leaves less time and attention for, again, typically developing children. Can you speak to that concern?

[Sharon Lowery's]

Sure. I think, no, I know that because we are a very small setting, so class sizes are small. And so, I would say that in a general education setting or in a charter school where you've got 30 plus peers, that that's true in all educational settings.

There are going to be the outliers that need additional attention. This is a small setting, and it is most assuredly individualized so that where a child is academically, the teachers know, and they're going to be able to say, okay, yeah, so-and-so is having a little bit of a rough time. Let's get you put back and focused on what your lesson is, what you're working on.

Because it's a small setting, and because there are additional adults in the classrooms, they can support the needs of one child while there are other adults that can help them, the traditional learners or the other students who are distracted by somebody having a rough time. And also, because of the additional adults, if somebody's having a hard time and is disrupting the learning environment, then they and one of the support staff can go outside or go out into the hallway and have a conversation to try to help them regulate that or maybe get their sensory needs met. Do they need to be out on the trampoline for a few minutes?

Do they need to get a drink of water? Do they need a snack? Because blood sugar issues have come up.

So, because we know those kids, and that's true for traditional learners as well. Somebody's having a hard day. Okay, what does your body need right now?

Because you're having a hard time focusing.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. And again, having that small environment allows you to be able to do that, again, to meet the needs of all the students who are in the classroom. And then having those additional adults also afford you the opportunity to do that.

[Sharon Lowery's]

Absolutely. And I think, too, you can extend this into traditional learning environments through training, through the support staff. If a child's an included student in, say, a general education, not a public school or a charter school, even a private school, there is ways to teach and train them, whether it's a para, whether it's, you know, a one-to-one

therapist, to really understand their child's unique needs in ways that support them being able to access the learning environment.

So, it's not just because we have this small inclusive setting, which I'm super grateful for, and it's a real privilege to support our educators. But I don't want it to feel like this isn't something that can't be replicated in other environments. And I think that, unfortunately, in education, the ABA methodology has overtaken much of special education.

And I think when you do that, you're really missing out on the opportunities to understand your students and their unique individual needs and how to address those so they can be more successfully included in whatever environment the parents have chosen for them.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. And I really want to piggyback on what you were saying about it's not just having that small environment and having those additional adults. It's really your approach to providing and creating this environment where all students have the opportunity to thrive.

And then also, the other thing that you said is about being intentional about what you want to do and what you want to achieve and how you want to support all the students who come into that learning environment.

[Sharon Lowery's]

Yes. And I think, you know, I have lots of opinions about how kids are supported in general education settings and having the paras because I don't believe there is truly an understanding of the sensory system of the student they're supporting or their unique learning styles. And also how to really partner with the educators because so often the one-to-one can be really seen separate and really not understand the educational environment.

And I am the daughter of a special education teacher so I have always had deep respect for them and watched how my mom worked for so many years and really being respectful of the educators. And I think that's also really key to successfully supporting the students in their environment.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. So last week on the podcast, we talked about strategies for easing this back-to-school transition for children. This is where we are right now.

We're recording this in August. Now, in an inclusive environment like Smart Start, how do you prepare typically developing children, those with unique needs for the start of the

school year? Are there things that you do and that you enjoy doing that you found to be particularly helpful?

[Sharon Lowery's]

Yes. So we send out a welcome packet to our children's and their families a week or two before the school year starts and it has the pictures of all the friends that are going to be in their class. If it's a continuing student, then the teachers have worked with them throughout because we have a summer session throughout the summer.

Oh, the next, you know, when we come back in August, you're going to be a radiator and your teacher is going to be Miss Vanessa and your friends from your class are going to be and, you know, helping them know who's coming. And if it's a student who's new to the school, the welcome packet really helps them understand, OK, this is for you to use with your child. You can review the pictures with them.

It goes through the order of the day because I think in all of ours, particularly in preschool, the order of the day does not change. What we do each day changes, but the order doesn't change because we know the predictability for all children of what's coming next eases their anxiety and then they're more regulated and able to absorb what's being presented or what the activity is. So the order of the day is on the welcome packet as well so that the parent also has that reduction in their own anxiety because we are our kids barometer.

So I always tell our families when they're first starting, you have to have an Academy Award performance for your child and you have to say you're going to have a great day. I love you and I can't wait to hear all the things that you did because we know children pick up our own anxiety and if they hug and say it's OK, honey, it's going to be OK. What you're saying is I'm really unsure about this and maybe you should be too.

So it's a lot of preparation. And if a child's in a general education setting or in a public school setting and it's a new environment, asking to go ahead of time and taking pictures of the school, meeting the teacher, going to the setting, and then being able to review that with the child so that each night or each day they can, you know, you can print the pictures out and create a little book. Yep, your teacher is Mr. So-and-so and these are who your friends are going to be and this is the setting, this is the playground, this is where the bathroom is. So really helping them have that anticipation of understanding what might be coming next helps tremendously.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Absolutely, I love that. And then I find that many schools are really open to, you know, even showing kids around like before school starts because the teachers are there prepping anyway and it could be a principal, a vice principal who can kind of show kids

around, even, you know, parents taking kids to the schoolyard, particularly if they're moving from elementary to middle school or from preschool to an elementary school, just familiarizing themselves with the environment. This is where a drop-off is going to be, this is the door we're going to go in. Again, alleviating all of that anxiety can be particularly helpful.

[Sharon Lowery's]

Absolutely, and if the parent has the opportunity to have a little short meeting with the teacher just to share with this who my child is, these are the things that have been really successful with him or her, these are some of the challenges that we've had. They, you know, helping them understand their sensory system or their behaviors when he is feeling anxious, you are likely to see some of these kinds of things happening or, you know, at 11 o'clock his blood sugar really drops and if he can have a little snack or something you're going to have a child who can make it to lunch and be much more successful and focused. Those things really help and really helping that teacher know that you're there to partner with them makes a big difference.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

It really does, I mean, and that partnership is so important throughout that academic term and even beyond, you know, because again it's establishing those relationships and with the transition to a new teacher, the next academic year, all of that is so important. And, you know, when I think about parents who might be listening and might have kiddos in preschool right now and they're thinking about, you know, maybe not this fall, but next fall, an academic environment for their kiddos and they're looking for an inclusive relationship-based program for their child, are there things that they should be looking for, questions that they should be asking you when they're considering a placement for their typical developing or a child with learning or thinking differences?

[Sharon Lowery's]

Yeah, when I have families that call, I share with them a little bit about the program. Most often they've viewed the website or they know that we are just a really different kind of a program because we are a developmental relationship-based program that has a therapeutic focus. So, for our kids with and our families with children with delays in their development, I have the family tour with the child.

And what that always does is, especially if it's their first experience with preschool or a therapeutic setting, is to ease their hearts and minds to say, oh, okay, this is preschool and these are the ways we're going to support your child. But the child always tells the story. So, when they come in and they get to be out on the play yard and they get to dig in the sand and play with the trucks and, oh my goodness, SmartStart loves trucks just as much as I do because they have so many of them or we have a trampoline.

And they see their child or another little friend will come over and start playing with them. It gives them that assurance that it's going to be okay. And my goal is when I am touring a family with a child with special needs is just to be able to say, I mean, this is my 40th year, so I have observed and assessed and worked with lots and lots of children at this point in my life.

But I can say, okay, I can see that he's got some issues and texture sensitivities and that's really great that I can see that because that helps us understand we've got to work through that because that's going to impact his ability to read. It's going to impact his ability to write. We were going to work on the bilateral coordination and all of a sudden they feel like, okay, all right, we're going to be able to work through these challenges that we're having.

And if it's a child who does not have any delays in development, lots and lots of preschools are very kind of a play inside, play outside type of program without a really focused curriculum. And that works for some children, but it doesn't work well for all children. So giving them rich experiences and rich opportunities for learning and growth helps prepare them for whatever educational setting their parents want.

Most often they end up staying and moving into our elementary program because they love a really small environment and knowing that their kids are going to be able to have that focused learning and to stay with their friends. But if they choose to go to a public setting or a private setting or whatever the family's hopes and dreams are for the educational setting, we want to make sure they're as prepared as possible because we know now in California and across the country that academics hit intensely as of kindergarten. So we want to make sure that they're prepared, but done in a really developmentally appropriate way.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Right. And you're preparing them, like you said, academically, but also social, emotionally, and meeting those unique needs with a therapeutic component to your program, which is so important.

[Sharon Lowery's]

Yes. A hundred percent.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Yes. Sharon, it has been an absolute pleasure having you on the podcast today, and I appreciate you sharing your insights and learning more about your school. And as we wrap up, I'd love for you to share how parents and educators who are interested in learning more about Smart Start or want to connect with you can reach out, whether that's through your website or email address, I'd love for you to share.

[Sharon Lowery's]

Thank you. And thank you so much for giving me this opportunity. I obviously love to share the experiences I've had and our families have had.

If somebody would like to contact me, the easiest way is through my email, which is Sharon, S-H-A-R-O-N, at SmartStartSchool.com. And the website is SmartStartSchool.com. And you can also call us, and our phone number is 310-452-KIDS, 5437.

And any of those ways are great ways to connect with us. And I do all tours individually, and I tour everybody personally. So I would be very happy to chat with anybody, give people my opinions, my thoughts.

If they just need recommendations or ways to focus their journey and their search, I'm always happy to do that as well.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Wonderful. Thank you so much. And I will be sure to put the email address, phone number, and website in the show notes as well.

Thank you again, Sharon. I really appreciate you being here.

[Sharon Lowery's]

My great pleasure. Thank you.

[Dr. Karen Wilson]

Thank you so much for tuning in. If you found today's conversation valuable, please share this episode with others who might benefit. Until next time, have a fabulous day.