

Lauren 00:11

Welcome back to the LDA podcast, a podcast created by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. This series is dedicated to improving the lives and education of all learners. In this episode, we talk with John Wilson, the executive director of SOAR, about parenting strategies for children with learning disabilities.

Kristina Scott 00:35

Hello, everyone, I'm here with John Wilson, who's the executive director at SOAR, a nonprofit school adventure camp and gap year experience serving youth diagnosed with learning disabilities and ADHD. John actively presents to parents and professionals at local state and national conferences. Thank you for joining us, John.

John Wilson 00:55

It's my pleasure.

Kristina Scott 00:56

Great. So I, probably like most listeners, have had this vision of parenthood that really looked like the highlight social media reel. I'm now realizing that parenthood isn't quite that way.

John Wilson 01:10

Fantasy, reality.

Kristina Scott 01:13

So you talk to many parents, what do you hear from a lot of the parents that you speak with?

John Wilson 01:19

Well, it's, it's interesting, we get so caught up in the trials and tribulations of how difficult it is, especially managing kids that are impulsive, or are challenged in a variety of different ways, whether it's low self esteem or poor organizational skills, or struggling with social skills and how hard it is to, you know, to watch your child struggle. In particular, one of the things that plagues parents the most is the friendships that their kids sometimes don't have, and how hard that is. And so, you know, we've developed over the years a series of strategies that seem to help and support any number of those important life skills that kids need to develop in order to live and sustain better, healthier social lives.

Kristina Scott 02:14

Can you give us an example of one of those strategies?

John Wilson 02:16

Well, sure, you know, our kids are very reactive, right? And so, one of the things that I encourage families to do is to roleplay opportunities so that they're prepared when things kind of go awry, or just to roleplay giving other kids compliments. You know, a lot of kids sometimes struggle to get focused about wanting to sort of jump in impulsively on the things that matter to them, when honestly, what matters to other kids sometimes is what you think about them. The other thing that kids naturally, you know, kind of gravitate towards, is kids who liked the same things that they like. And so finding ways to be inclusive

of others, and practice that with your kids, so that they are practicing being included versus being too self focused, because a lot of times our kids can get pretty self absorbed with their reality. And another strategy that I have personally employed and encouraged is, I create these mock scenarios where my kids might get picked at, like, for instance, someone takes your hat from you. And you know, plays keep away. Why is that fun for them? Well, it's fun for them because it's like putting a centipede in a jar and shaking the jar, you want to see the centipede react. But if you don't react, if you don't go bananas because someone is taking your hat and give them what they want, then that's no fun to do to you. And so, you know, actually, with my son, I would create environments and scenarios where we would practice that. And so when it finally came time, that he experienced those things, he knew what to do, he didn't react, and he was not fun to pick at, because he wasn't giving them what they wanted. We also practice it again, kids can be kind of impulsive and say something like, 'I dare you to do something stupid,' right? And so my kids develop the mantra, because we practice it all the time, we roleplay it, and they look at me and say, 'I'm not doing that. That's stupid.' And so we we spent a lot of time practicing social interactions that would prepare them in real life when those social opportunities afforded themselves in a way that would nurture and encourage relationships instead of, you know, make them the object of ridicule or the butt of a joke, or the person that made that encounter difficult for somebody else.

Kristina Scott 04:59

Those are great social strategies. Do you have social strategies for parents that often seem to be at odds with their child and the escalating fighting that may occur? Or the "no, no, no," and how to get around that?

John Wilson 05:12

I do I do. So there's a lot of power in doing what's called an emotional reboot. Right? So if you just walk away from a situation, sometimes it's just 10 seconds, sometimes it could be, you know what, Mommy needs a timeout, right? Just a few minutes to disengage, so that when you come back to a conversation, you're not reacting, instead, you're taking what I call response ability, you're choosing the way that you're going to respond. I liken it to this, in any given scenario with your child, you got a couple different solutions. Some of those solutions are gas, and some of those solutions are water to put out the fire. Sometimes you get it right, you know the tool to use, you use it correctly, you extinguish the problem, and everyone's happy and moved on. Sometimes you thought that the solution was going to be water, but it turns out it was gas and inflamed the situation, and now you've got a little bigger mess to clean up. But what you can control are those rare times when, and it happens, because we're human beings, you know, what is water and you know, what is gas, and you think to yourself, should I use the water, or the gas? And you purposely sprinkle some of the gas on a situation because you're frustrated, you're upset. And when that happens, what happens? You got a bigger mess to clean up, right? It felt good for the second that it took to sprinkle the gas, short term reward, with again, how long did it take to deescalate the situation? And you know, you never feel great about it afterwards, because it ended up being so much more work. And you know, the kind hearted, nurturing version of yourself was like, why did you do that? Well, you did it because you're a human being and you reacted, right? And so, you know, being purposeful about finding ways to approach and then disengage, can be really critical. I also sometimes in a conversation, if your kid has a phone, sometimes it's healthier to have a conversation via texts, because then you don't have to deal with the eye rolls and the and the sighs...

Kristina Scott 07:33

All those nonverbal portions of communication.

John Wilson 07:36

So much of our communication is nonverbal. And then the last thing that I encourage families to do, or parents is, whenever you're dealing with a difficult situation, or you're trying to have a difficult conversation, when you spend a few moments really trying to see it from your child's perspective and validate where they're coming from, you change the whole tone of what that conversation is going to look like.

Kristina Scott 08:00

So just actively listening it sounds like.

John Wilson 08:02

Not just actively listening, but really saying things like, yeah, I could see why that would be really frustrating for you, you know I get that, I really do. I'm sorry, that hurt your feelings. And I want to come and find a solution. I don't totally agree with what you're saying. But I do appreciate how it's making you feel. And when you validate how they're feeling, and you're really willing to enter into a conversation, that is a discussion and not, 'this is how it's going to be done, because I'm bigger,' then you're gonna get a better result.

Kristina Scott 08:39

So what you had just said about the fire, the gasoline or the water, sometimes it's, it's all I could always just put water on and do some of the things that I asked my child to do, like, clean their chaos of a room. But if I'm always doing that, am I encouraging their own responsibility, their own...I don't know, tasks I asked of them.

John Wilson 09:04

You've come to the crux of the problem. Because, you know, what you're really saying is, if I continue to be the external locus of control, how are they going to develop the intrinsic motivation to do it for themselves? Alright, and the answer is, eventually, someday they will. Right. So think about yourself for just a moment. How...did you become a version of your parents? I know I did. Right? But it took a while. And so by developing those skills and creating those expectations, and helping them develop those strategies, eventually, when, and it may not happen, you know, when they're first out on the road, but eventually, all of that is going to come back into play. And they're going to develop that internal motivation. But as they are younger, you are more of the external locus of control, then you are trying to find specific tangible ways for you to turn responsibility over to them and expectation over to them. Now, the room cleaning with my daughter is particularly challenging, right? She is a little Messy Marvin, I mean, she is just terrible. And she just starts a project and sets it down. And you know, there's little bits of laundry all over the house every day. However, sometimes what I will do simply is I will grab her phone, and I will take her little computer away and her iPad, and I will say, and again she's 15 now, and I will say you can have these things back when the following things are done. They're entirely up to you when you do them, how you do them. But they've got to pass my inspection. And we do that about once

a week. And so she used to fuss and argue about it. Now, she just hands them over. And she will either work on her art projects and not do it until she can't stand it anymore. But ultimately, she will do the thing that she's asked to do, because she wants those resources back. And she is not yet in that place where she will keep her room clean. Because from an intrinsic situation, she likes her room clean. That's not her reality, someday it might be. But that is not her reality. Now, she's doing it because she wants access to resources. And in life as adults, very often we do things we don't want to do because we want access to resources. And so the lesson there is a lesson in life. So it's okay to continue to be that external locus of control for a little longer. And remember also that these kids tend to be three to five years less mature than your typical peers. And so you know, you're gonna have to do that longer than let's say, your best friend is having to do it for their kids. And that's okay.

John Wilson 09:24

So, I have a child that does amazing throughout the whole school day, and then comes home and completely loses it, like chaos ensues. Why is that? And what do I do to help them during that transition to a home, so I don't see the whole chaos of their day unfolding?

John Wilson 12:19

So I'm gonna give you three things to think about. All right. One is, very often that happens because they're coming off their medication if they are on medication. And so two, they've been in a very structured environment, coming home to an unstructured environment. And so are there things that you can do to create structure at home? And then the third doesn't really answer that question, but it's one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard a kid say to me. When I work with kids, sometimes I'll ask them, 'Hey, I'm a dad, do you have any advice for me as a dad?' And this young lady two years ago, gave me a piece of advice that honestly changed my life. She said, when you come home from work, avoid the urge to just start right in on your kid telling them what they didn't do. Because when you do that, they hear the car garage door open, they hear the door open, and instead of thinking 'Daddy's home,' they think, 'oh, no, Dad's home.' And I was doing that. I'd walk in the door, and I'd see my son playing on the computer and the trash wouldn't have been taken out. And the kitchen was a mess. And he had just been totally self focused and didn't think about anybody else. And the first words out of my mouth were, you know, get off the computer, take care of the trash. Instead of Hi, son, how was your day? How are you doing? Let's sit down, I want to hear all about it. And then, now we structure our day, okay. And I recognize that there are really 15 minutes in the day that are really, really important. The first five I see him after school and the last five before he goes to bed. And I try and really kind of keep those on so that our relationship is one that is wholesome and good and healthy. So that when I am trying to create structure for him at home, you know, we are open to having that as part of the conversation. Now going back to step two and structure, because I have that relationship now with him, that's an interaction, that communication that we're having about, okay, this isn't working, what can we try to do to make it work better more effectively, and involve them in that process. And when the wheels fall off, and it doesn't work? Stop, have the conversation again, figure out why the strategy that the two of you have agreed upon didn't work and come up with a new strategy. And the most important part of that is that they are part of that process. And so as you develop and begin to create the structure of what the afternoon is going to look like, and you fine tune it together, you can begin to start to see less of the reactionary, less of the explosion, less of the chaos, because our kids really while they are

hounds of chaos, they really do strive and thrive when given opportunity to structure and have structure in their lives.

John Wilson 12:59

Great. Some great advice on all fronts there. I really like the five minutes, five minutes, five minutes because that's something simple that all of us can do. It's not rocket science, it's 15 minutes of our day that we can really piece out.

John Wilson 15:30

And same for your spouses, by the way.

Kristina Scott 15:33

I'll take note of that as he'll be very happy to hear that. So you have an entire program devoted to students with learning disabilities and ADHD. Can you tell us a little more about the program about what you do there?

John Wilson 15:49

So SOAR is one of the largest and most well-known nationally recognized summer camps in the world that serves this population of kids. We'll serve around 650 kids between our locations in North Carolina, Wyoming, Florida, California, we've got a program in the Adirondacks and Spanish immersion course in Peru, we'll take kids to Belize and Costa Rica. And so we offer a really low staff to student, four students for every one staff. And we use adventure and experiential opportunities to create these tangible experiences that then we use those to draw back to what has allowed us to be successful here, how can we be successful at home. We're focusing on organization, on social skills, on problem solving, on leadership, on being part of a team, on goal setting. And by doing those things, you know, it's kind of like summer camp, but it's turbocharged, it's very high adventure. We also have a residential boarding school that serves 32 students. And the program is unique because students spend two weeks in academics and then two weeks on expedition courses where they continue the academics, but they're doing remarkable things like learning to scuba dive in Florida, or, you know, hike portions of the Appalachian Trail, or go to Big Bend National Park in Texas, or you go to Costa Rica or Belize, there is an international component to that. And so it's two weeks on campus, two weeks in expedition, rotating throughout the entire semester, academic year. And it's a fully accredited boarding high school. So we'll do grades 8-12. And then, lastly, I have a gap year program out in Wyoming that takes up to 12 gap year students, and it has the same sort of model where they're in residence for two weeks, on expeditions for two weeks. But while they're in residence, they're attending college courses and they are also doing work, internships, mentorships, in the community learning job skills, and then, you know, learning those critical life skills to kind of be that best version of themselves as they exit, recognizing that so many young men and women could use an extra year of cultivating and seasoning before being launched. And what's fun about the gap year program is that so many universities, you know, like Princeton, and Harvard, are now encouraging in their acceptance letter for you to consider a gap year and you can get accepted to college and defer a year. Because colleges recognize that gap, your students tend to come into the program more motivated, more centered, ready to kind of buckle down and get the job done. They graduate in four years, and they get involved really quickly. So we're really

excited about being able to create that opportunity for kids. And you know, we're one of the very few academic year gap year programs specifically for kids with learning and attention challenges.

Kristina Scott 19:08

So if people wanted to hear or find out more about either you or the SOAR program, where could they go to get more information?

John Wilson 19:14

So our website is soarnc.org. And certainly you're welcome to call us at 828-456-3435. The website has lots of wonderful information and you can inquire, you can make an application, you can look at every one of our programs, and we would love to hear from you.

Kristina Scott 19:43

Thank you, John, you gave us his parents great advice. And you also kind of gave us something to think about in terms of the programming that we want for our children, whether it'd be that gap year or whether it be a learning experience or an adventure camp type experience. So I appreciate it.

19:58

And I appreciate that you're doing this series of podcasts, I know you took that on. It's a big responsibility and you're doing great.

Kristina Scott 20:04

Thank you.

Lauren 20:12

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. This series is made possible by The Learning Disabilities Foundation of America. Our theme music is little idea by Scott Holmes. In our next episode, we'll sit down with Dr. Vincent Alfonso and Monica McHale Small about learning disabilities and the brain. For more resources from Ida, visit Idaamerica.org