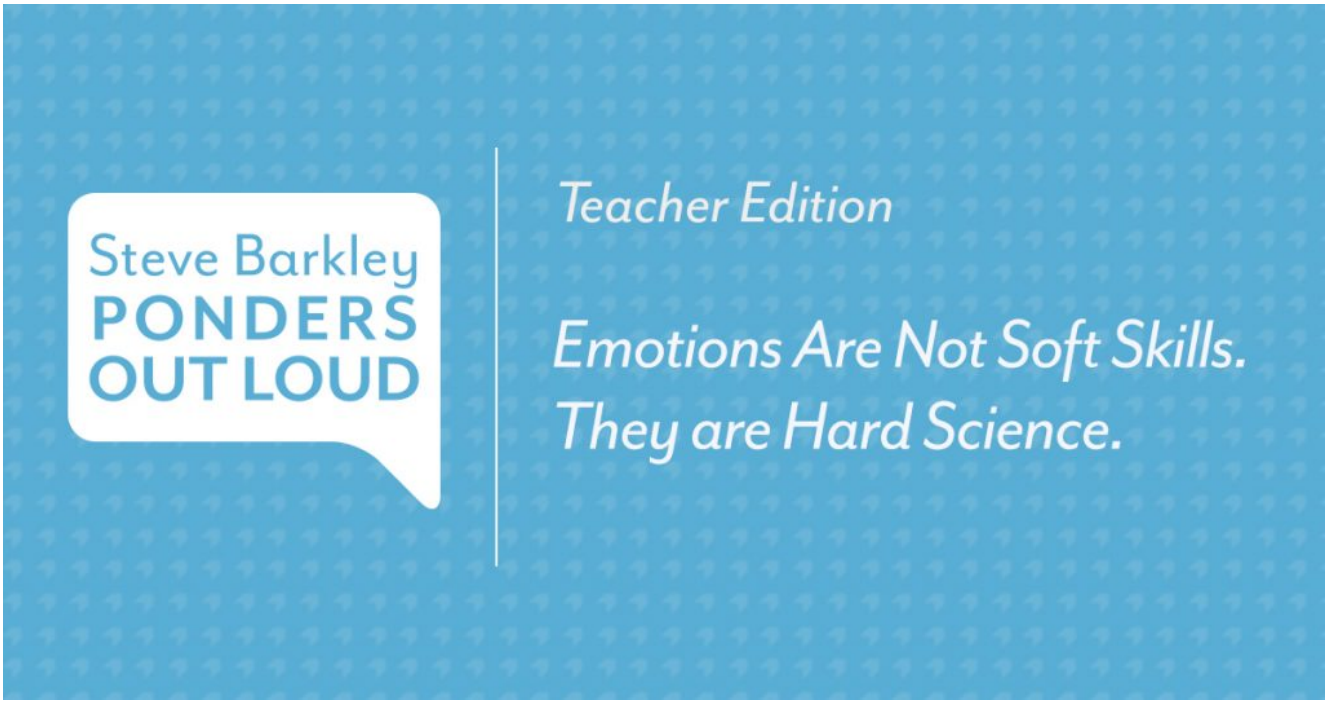
Podcast for Teachers: Emotions Are Not Soft Skills. They are Hard Science.



Tara Brown, The Connection Coach, shares the need for relationships to precede relevance and rigor. The author of "Different Cultures – Common Ground," shares beliefs and strategies that guide us to communicate the needed messages to students. She stresses the need for students to understand that they can be in the driver's seat for their future.

Visit Tara's website.
Find Tara's book, "Different Cultures, Common Ground – 85 Proven Strategies to Connect in Your Classroom" here.

Subscribe to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast on iTunes or visit BarkleyPD.com to find new episodes!

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Steve [Intro]: 00:00 Hello and welcome to the teacher edition of the Steve Barkley ponders out loud podcast. The complexity

of teaching is both challenging and rewarding and my curiosity is piqued whenever I explore with teachers the multiple pathways for facilitating student engagement in the exciting world of learning. This podcast looks to serve teachers as they motivate and support their learners. Thanks for listening. I'M delighted you're here.

Steve: 00:34 Emotions are not soft skills. They are hard science. Our guest today is Tara brown, an experienced teacher, an athletic coach, and today, a sought after speaker and consultant to schools internationally. Tara's experiences with that risk youth has solidified her commitment to the power of connections. She's known as the connection coach. Welcome Tara.

Tara: 01:01 I am thrilled to be here, Steve. Thank you.

Steve: 01:05 So for starters, why the connection coach?

Tara: 01:09 When I left the classroom and I started getting ready to speak, I had to figure out what the heck was I gonna start talking about. And I realized, as I started looking back over my career, that it all kept coming back to my ability to connect with kids, to reach kids. And that's where it started. It was my ability to connect with kids. And once I realized that that was a common theme throughout all the kids that I work with, whether it was rural or in gang territory or wherever it was, it was that common theme of being able to connect with a child in order to flip that motivation on switch. And so that really became the foundation of my work after I left the classroom, was that power of connections to unleashed potential.

Steve: 01:57 So, Tara, I know that early in your career, you coached as well as taught. I'm wondering what connections you made between effectiveness in coaching and effectiveness in teaching?

Tara: 02:15 I think one thing is understanding really clearly

that people buy into the leader before they buy into the vision. So that's one thing, is connecting on a way that the individual really buys into who you are as the leader. And then the other thing is making sure that as the leader, I see that person beyond just an athlete, an X and O, a play sheet or a body in a desk in a classroom. Getting beyond just seeing them as that person and getting to know them as an individual, because once a person feels seen and heard and validated, that's gonna feed their soul and allow for that willingness to engage to increase. And so whether I'm on the court with my whistle or whether I'm in the classroom with my pen, it's the same thing – they have to buy into me and they have to feel that I see them and really care for who they are as an individual.

Steve: 03:16 You hit on my magic word. The magic word for me is knowing. K N O W I N G – that's where it all starts. I've gotta dig into to the knowing piece. You were also a student athlete and a student in classrooms. Connections that you make from those experiences to to your work today?

Tara: 03:44 I think the goal setting, being driven intrinsically and helping students and athletes, but especially students and under-resourced kids, because a lot of kids in poverty and I work with a lot of kids in poverty, they embrace learned helplessness very early. And so helping them begin to see a different way in showing up in the world and understanding that that intrinsic motivation is part of success in life. And a lot of kids don't really see themselves as being in control of their life, being the CEO of their life, if you will. And so part of my work was really helping them begin to see themselves as more in control. And so part of it was the goal setting. And some of it was little goals. And Steven Covey talks about the personal integrity account and that's one thing I implemented in the classroom with helping kids set goals and then figuring out did I put a withdrawal in my personal integrity account by following

through and setting that goal?

Tara: 04:53 Or did I take a withdrawal out because I caved and I didn't hold myself accountable to what I said I was gonna do? When they began to feel what it felt like to actually put a deposit in that bank account and hold themselves accountable and follow through on a goal, it's life altering because those little goals become bigger goals because you can trust yourself more because you say, I'm gonna do this and then, oh, I I've got a track record right now of seven things I said I was gonna do and I did. And so building on that with kids was, I think one of the biggest things, because as an athlete, you have those goals that you chunk out and you have little wins along the way. And so I really tried to set kids up to have those little wins and to feel what it felt like to allow themselves to celebrate. I said I was gonna do that and I did it. And that's where a lot of self-efficacy and self-esteem is built on that foundation of little wins and goal setting.

Steve: 05:55 I was gonna say that I'm hearing locus of control.

Tara: 05:58 Mm-Hmm. Absolutely.

Steve: 06:00 That's what you accomplish.

Tara: 06:05 Exactly. And for a lot of kids, they've never thought about themselves as taking the wheel of their life. They've never really thought, wait, I can do that? And so when we're able to give kids that ability to go, no, no, don't just sit in the back seat. You need to get in the driver's seat, you need to grab the wheel, you get to decide you're the CEO of your life. And when you start having those kind of conversations with kids, it is very empowering. And then you add that to those consistent, bank account – boom, boom, boom. Then you start seeing a kid start seeing the world differently and that's really exciting.

Steve: 06:46 So you talked about, about emotions not being

soft skills, hard science. So what is it that science has uncovered for us about emotions and learning?

Tara: 06:58 Well, the learning process is an emotional journey. And I say all the time, you can't read a book and run from a line at the same time. And a lot of our kids, they leave the school, they're running from lines. And so the emotional state that they have when they walk into the school building into our classrooms, it dictates everything. And so we know from elevated cortisol, there's gonna be no higher level learning. It's physically impossible, biologically impossible. We also know that the emotional state of the learner impacts perception and our thought processes and our actions. And we also know that learning is a risk. It's a very emotional process. Learning is a risk. It can be scary, it can be intimidating. And so the emotional environment that a child walks into on a day to day basis and see that's also the key, Steve.

Tara: 07:53 Is there consistency in what that child can bank on every day when they walk into that classroom? Can they rely on the consistency and the emotional state of that educational environment, on the teacher, on what they feel and experience in the classroom? Because all of that allows for the amygdala to calm down. All of it allows for that cortisol to come down. And when we intersperse dopamine in the process, that allows for that emotional state to change in a way that the brain wants more of that, whatever it is that's allowing that dopamine release, your brain goes, oh, I like that. And so I tell teachers all the time, have your kids be addicted to what it feels like when they're around you, when they're in your classroom, when they're in your presence. And that environment allows for the emotional state to get down to a place where we're regulated. And we also like the process and we feel safe. And so all of that ties into the emotional piece of the learning.

Steve: 09:00 If we know that there's this strong connection

between relationships, emotions and the brain, what would you say in the work that you've done, are some of the most common things we overlook either within a classroom or within a school?

Tara: 09:21 Well, unfortunately, we're still not totally trusting the research in some districts and some schools. When rigor, relevance and relationship came down from the educational mountaintop, I was like that dog that kind of went, "hm?" I was immediately like, wait, that's that's in the wrong order. And unfortunately, with the focus on end of course testing and data and all of that, we have put rigor in front of getting the brain in an emotional state of learning. And so you have teachers literally that have told me, I don't have time to build relationships because I have so much content to cover. And I'm like, no, that's not steeped in research. That is not trusting the research that says when we make sure that the emotional state of that learner is in a primed state, you're gonna be able to cover so much more content. And so I think that's probably one of the biggest pieces that I see still in this country, in certain districts is that hesitancy to take time to put emotional deposits in those bank accounts, to have non contingent conversations, to create an environment where there's laughter and there's collaboration. And so if we can just trust the research and believe that when we invest in time to get to know those kids, it's gonna be so much more impactful with how much we can cover over a year's time.

Steve: 11:09 It's interesting because I've always said, one of the things we also have to do is trust the kids' brains. So what I'm hearing from you is, if we'll invest in that relationship, if we'll invest in having those emotions, that I can trust that the kid's brain, it can handle the learning piece that that's gonna come.

Tara: 11:35 Yeah. I was working with a staff, it was elementary and it was K-5 and before we started, and there was

probably like three different staffs we were working with and I was just walking around, chatting to people and I stopped at this one table and I said, hey, just curious, do y'all do like meditation, mindfulness morning meeting stuff? And the lady who was a second grade teacher, she goes, well now K-3 does and I said, what happens to four and five? And she goes, well, you know how they're all about that content.

Steve: 12:04

Tara: 12:05 And it's like, okay. That's a perfect example of us getting off track and not understanding the emotional piece and how relevant that is to priming the brain.

Steve: 12:20 Well Tara, you've you've published a book called, "Different Cultures – Common Ground," and I know that it's a whole book of lots of strategies. So I wanted to ask if there's a favorite two that you might might share with the teachers listening in here.

Tara: 12:39 Yeah. One of them, strategy number two, it talks about being present in your interactions with kids. And the example that I give and one that I really try to pay attention to is when a child comes up to my desk, what is it that I'm doing and saying and not saying that's relaying to that child, you are the most important thing in my world right now. How can I serve you? And so that means, put the pen down. Turn. Have your body language be there. Make eye contact. Smile, because it's not just that child you're sending that message to, it's every single child in that room that's saying you are the most important person right now. How can I serve you? And that level of intentionality is so powerful to allow that child to feel seen and heard and validated. And once we experience that on multiple levels, the emotional state, the brain, the willingness, is going to be there for that child to engage. So that's one and boy, in this society…whew.

Steve: 13:42 I have to tell you, with that one, you just rang

a bell for me of one that happened a whole lot of years ago that stays fixed in my
mind. And thank goodness I was team teaching , but a little first grader came up to me and my mind was somewhere else. And it wasn't until I saw him walk away from me and go over to my colleague that I knew exactly what had happened. If you played my words, I said all the right things to him, but he could tell immediately in my nonverbals, he was nowhere near the top of important things. And I remember, as I saw him walking over to my colleague, it struck me exactly what happened. And I was so thankful that that he knew enough to go get what he needed when I hadn't delivered it to him. You have another one to share?

Tara: 14:36 I do. There's another one strategy, 36, called bend it like Gumby. And that talks about not falling in love with your lesson plan. There are so many teachers that are so focused on having it be exactly the way they think it should be. And one thing I've learned is that expect the unexpected, because it ain't gonna look like what you think it's gonna look like 90% of the time. And so being able to just flow and accept that, oh, we're about to take a left turn and allow for that, because that's really where the magic happens. I mean, this is a creative endeavor. Teaching is an art form and we've gotten away from the art and the creativity. And so allowing for us to go, okay, we're just gonna be flexible here because this isn't what I thought it was gonna be or what it's gonna look like, but that's okay. And so that's another one that I think for a lot of teachers is just allowing themselves to flow a little bit more.

Steve: 15:33 Well, thanks Tara. Thanks for all your your energy and your and your thoughtfulness that you've shared here with us. We'll stick a link to your book in the lead-in to the podcast. Would you wanna take a moment and tell folks the best way for them to connect with you?

Tara: 15:50 My website's theconnectioncoach.org.

Steve: 15:53 We’ll post that too.

Tara: 15:54 Yeah. Thank you, Steve.

Steve: 15:55 Thanks so much for your commitment to kids and to teachers. Much appreciated.

Tara: 16:01 Thank you.

Steve [Outro]: 16:04 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean. And please remember to rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you’re pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.