

Shmanners 325: Back 2 School

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[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to *Shmanners*.

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: For ordinary occasions. Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: So, we're talking about back to school. I know I— how are you? Hey, how are you?

Teresa: Hey, how are you?

Travis: We're talking about back to school.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And I just want to say— and I know it's a Christmas song— but you know in the "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas" and there's a line where it says "Mom and dad can hardly wait for school to start again."

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: That's horse apples.

Teresa: Oh yeah?

Travis: Yeah, man! First of all, I love hanging out with Bebe. Bebe's the only one in school. I like hanging out with Dot, too. [laughs] Don't get it wrong.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But I think it's way more stressful when school is in, right? 'Cause you gotta get your kid ready in the morning, you gotta get 'em to school, and then you gotta go pick 'em up, and then you're doing, like, soccer, and you're doing stuff, and there's lunches to pack, and there's clothes to pick out, and there's things— things to sign!

Teresa: The stress is different, because yes, there are lots of, like, bursts of stress, I think. Except when the kids are home all day every day, it's very tiring for me. [laughs]

Travis: Yes, but that is a stress and tiring I can understand, right? And that Bebe can understand, right? Of, like, we're doing stuff, and we're going places, and we're filling our day with things. But when it's just like, "We need to get to school or we're gonna be late!" That happened this morning, right?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: We were running behind. And I was like— and we got in the car and I was like, "Hey. Sorry it was so rushed buddy, but we can't be late."

And she was like, "Why not?"

And I said, "'Cause we'll get in trouble."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And she was like, "How will we get in trouble?" And I was like, "Well, if you're late enough times, we have to go talk to the principal."

And she was like, "And then what?"

I was like, "And then the school will be mad at us."

And she said, "How will the building be mad at us?!"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And she meant it completely sincerely. And I was like, "No— no, like the people that work there."

And she was like, "Why?"

And I was like, "Because!"

Teresa: Well, I think specifically they can't expel or suspend you anymore for tardies and absences. But I think that the law can fine you, right? For truancy?

Travis: Well, here's the thing. I'm an adult. I don't know if people know this about me. I'm an adult. And the thing... listen. There's lots of bad stuff that can happen to you, and there's lots that I'm afraid of. But one of my biggest anxiety triggers is another adult who I perceive as more adult than me saying "You did a bad thing."

And me being like, "I know. Yes."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: "I— yeah. Man, I know. Yeah!" It always— I feel like those coaches in, like, after game things when they lose. And they're like, "Yeah, you know? Uh, we made a lot of mistakes, and—" there's a podcast called *The Dumb Dads Podcast* and they do these TikToks about, like, back to school. They've done it the last couple years. And it's like the coaches after the game and they're like— and they get, like, questions from the audience. And it's like, "Did the first day of school picture happen?"

And they're like, "Uh, technically yes. But we're gonna run some drills, and then take another shot at it... this Sunday."

Um, anyways, that's— that's how I feel. Most days it's, like, smooth sailing. It's great. And then something— anyways, we're talking about back to school.

Teresa: That's right. We are talking about back to school. And like you said, there's a lot of things to juggle. There is a lot of stressors that can happen, not only for us but for kids as well. Um, so we're gonna go over a few of those things.

Travis: And speaking of stressors, in the second half of the episode, we have some special guests. Our friends Alex and April, who are the authors of a great

book called *A Case of the Zaps*. It's all about, like, anxiety in children, and identifying it and talking to them about it, and it's a really great interview. How do I know? Why, we already recorded it. So look forward to that. But first...

Teresa: Um, so one of the things that is hard about returning to school is not knowing what school will look like.

Travis: Hmm.

Teresa: We had this with Bebe. This was her first year as a kindergartener at a school that she didn't go to preschool in.

Travis: Yeah, she went to a different school for preschool. But this one's way closer! Yay!

Teresa: So in general all you can do is all you can do, right? So, you can control what you can control. One of the things you do is you can establish a practice routine. This was great because our school had, like, a little jump start program where it was just the kindergarteners and the preschoolers, and no big kids at school. So they got a chance to, like, figure out where the cafeteria was and their bathroom and all that kind of stuff.

Travis: Where the drop off will be, which is good for me. Once again, I don't want another adult saying, like, "What are you doing?" And me being like, "I don't know!"

Teresa: So, uh, that's a great way to provide structure so that you can get your child ready. You can even have them practice the morning and evening routines, right? Things like—

Travis: Run drills, you know, like it's a— uh, like it's— I was gonna say like it's a pit crew, but I guess also like it's an emergency drill on a cruise ship and you're figuring out where all the exits are.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: I guess on a cruise ship the exits are everywhere, if need be.

Teresa: [laughs] You have designated, like, emergency spots. Anyway, anyway.

Travis: [simultaneously] Yes, the lifeboats.

Teresa: You can do things like practice laying out their clothes, packing their backpack. If you need a lock on their locker, they can practice their, like, unlocking the combination lock. That's a great practice. Um, you know, open house day. That's amazing.

Travis: Oh, that's great. And also, uh— one of the things I— I really like that helps me is if I get a chance, like we did during the open house and stuff, to go see, like, what the classrooms look like and what the— you know, where the cafeteria is and all that stuff, it gives me the context to, like, ask her questions and, like, when she's describing a thing I can be like, "Oh! And did you go over to this place?" And make it, you know, very contextual for her.

Teresa: Yeah. Another concern is maybe your child's scholastic needs, right? You might not know what's expected of them as far as, like, the actual schoolwork goes, so there's a lot of resources that you can take advantage of. Uh, like parent-teacher night, right? So we had a open school thing... well, it was just the parents and the teachers. [laughs quietly] It wasn't the kids. [laughs]

Travis: It really gave me a chance to make joke and impress the other parents, which is really all I need. And also, a chance to found out what the teacher liked so I could send some of that stuff along with Bebe to really suck up to her, right? Like— it's like, "Oh, you—"

Teresa: Now, now, now.

Travis: What? Yeah, I— doesn't every parent want the teacher to be like, "I like this family the best."

Teresa: It's important to be kind to everyone, teachers especially.

Travis: Okay. That's a— hey, that's a very political way to put it. I wanna be the teacher's favorite.

Teresa: [through laughter] Okay.

Travis: Just— I— I have never grown out of that. Because I don't know if you know this about me, I want to be everyone's favorite. [laughs] And so it's not just the teacher. If it were up to me, I would send presents to that teacher every day,

to the point where she'd be like, "Is he trying... is he trying to date me? What's happening here?"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But no, no, no. I just wanna be the favorite.

Teresa: You don't have to be the favorite. It's important for your child to try *their* best and not try and be *the* best.

Travis: Okay, but what if your child just *is* the best?

Teresa: Okay. Alright. We don't wanna set up, like, perfectionism tendencies.

Travis: No!

Teresa: Uh, and a couple ways that you can do that is you can release the idea that your child has to be perfect at everything.

Travis: Yeah, no, that's true. I am of course just joking. Here is a thing that I don't think I would've thought about in this vein before I was a parent. And that is, like, getting stuff on their clothes, right? Getting paint on there or getting food on there or whatever.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And they come home with, like, dirty clothes. Letting go of that, you know, of like— and listen, it's not about, like, "Well, we can replace that. We can get you new things." Right? Because not everybody can afford to replace clothes that easily and that quickly. It's just more of like, "Well, yeah. You're— yeah, you're a kid. What're you gonna do?" You know?

Teresa: Exactly. You can also encourage learning outside of school by doing educational trips, or even reading to the kids. 20 minutes a day really helps with their reading comprehension, and also helps them regulate their own bodies, because the sitting and the reading is something that not every child really is super good at. I know Dottie... you know, she is not quite three yet, so sitting and reading for 20 minutes at a time is not something she is physically capable of.

But five minutes here, five minutes there, really helps her regulate, be able to sit and relax for a moment instead of being everywhere all at once, which is what she normally wants to do.

Travis: Also, something you can do anywhere anytime with no props and no— like, you don't need anything special, is, like, to help a kid work on their critical thinking. So if a kid asks you a question about something like, "Well, why did that happen?"

You can say, "Well, why do you think that happened?" And see if they can work it out or be like, "Why do you think they painted that blue? Why do you think—" and, you know, it doesn't have to have a correct answer, right? But just have them think through, like, "Well, maybe they wanted it to look like the sky or whatever." And you're like, "Oh, that's a good reason. I like that."

Teresa: And remember that you don't have to do this alone, parents. There's lots of places that you can find great play groups or tutor exchanges, homework clubs. I mean, even some schools have staff members who specialize in children who need a little extra attention, and that's just fine.

Travis: And listen, in all of that, I also want to say the other side of that is, not everybody has the ability to do all of those things. Some people are out there working, you know, two to three jobs to make ends meet, and they're busy and all that. There are really great video series, and we have done a lot— man, I credit a lot of, like, Daniel Tiger and, like, Bebe and Dot both like *Busy Beavers*, and—

Teresa: *Bubble Guppies*.

Travis: *Bubble Guppies*. There are lots of shows that, like, teach things, and that kids can gain a lot from. So screen time as a helping thing, to help, you know, educational stuff, and even if it's secret educational stuff hidden in fun shows like *Bubble Guppies*.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: I mean, there's lots of emotional lessons and critical thinking in *Bluey*. All of that stuff. So, like, the solution to these things isn't always, like, do more things, or go to more places. Sometimes it's just like, yeah. Just try to find the

things, you know, if your kid wants to watch iPad or whatever, just make sure that whatever it is, their getting something good from it.

Teresa: Um, there is also this time of year a lot of anxiety around sicknesses, right? Um, and the absences that come from that. Um, one of the things that you can do at home is to start your hygiene routines. Things like sneezing into your elbow, right? Proper cleaning techniques and hand washing. There are some great tutorials online for songs that you can sing while you wash your hands. You can get great fun colorful soaps. Like, all kinds of stuff to really help make your child feel like they have some control over their body.

Travis: And every time you buy 'em, like, a new stuffed animal, make sure you say, "And of course, if it comes to it, we might have to burn this."

You know, like in the *Velveteen Rabbit*? You know? Isn't that what happens in the *Velveteen Rabbit*?

Teresa: Yeah, because they get, like, Scarlet Fever!

Travis: Well, I mean, listen.

Teresa: Not— not 'cause their sneezy!

Travis: Well, sure. I mean, you need to set the full sc— no, I'm just kidding. Don't tell your kid about... I don't know why anyone would ever tell anyone about the *Velveteen Rabbit*.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Um... that and, like—

Teresa: But you just did.

Travis: I know! And I feel terrible about it.

Teresa: What is wrong with you?

Travis: I feel terrible about it. I was also just about to reference *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

Teresa: No!

Travis: I feel terrible.

Teresa: Stop it.

Travis: What's wrong with me? I have to stop.

Teresa: Um, another one can be making friends, which is equally as difficult for children as it is often for adults.

Travis: Correct.

Teresa: Um, but you can do a kind of, like, emotional coaching for them. Um, by doing things like teaching them to take turns, and being kind and respectful. Um, a great way to make new friends is to sign up for activities!

Travis: Oh, along with the emotional coaching thing, this is something that I know I still in many ways struggle with, and struggled with all through school, and so it's something I'm trying to, like... [sighs] indirectly coach Bebe on. I'm not trying to be like, "Hey. Get it together."

But to say like, "Oh! Do they have any siblings? Oh! What's their favorite color? When is their birthday?"

Right? And so encouraging her to ask them questions to get to know them, right? Because that's another thing of— listen. It's wonderful. We've all been there, right? Where you had a best friend growing up, and you were best friends because, like, you lived nearby or because, like—

Teresa: Yeah, next door. That's why we're best friends.

Travis: And it's just like, "Oh, I don't— I can't remember anything about 'em. But yeah, they were always kind of there."

And that's fine. That's great.

Teresa: Proximity is a really great way to make friends.

Travis: Right. And this is another thing, to, and we might get to this, but I've kind of touched on it a couple times. Of asking a kid one big question, like "How was school?" Or "What did you do at school today?"

Teresa: Right.

Travis: It can be overwhelming, right? Because I don't know— for me, like, I have a hard time remembering, like— you know, I'll get home from a convention and it's like I'm trying to think of, like, what to tell Teresa about the convention. And I'm like, "It was good? Uh, I did stuff?"

But if it's like, "Oh, did you go to any good restaurants? Oh, did you see anyone there you know?" Right? Specific questions. So, like, I try to figure out which week— they're called specials I think, but like, art, music, gym, that kind of thing, what Bebe has. And I'll be like, "Oh, what'd you do in gym today?" Or like, "Oh, did you play with anybody at recess? Oh, how was lunch? Did you finish everything?" Right? Specific, for lack of a better word, bite-sized questions.

Teresa: And it doesn't even have to be about anything specific. One great question is, "What is one good thing that happened today?"

Travis: Mm-hmm.

Teresa: That's it. I mean, it can be "My friend told me a joke," or "I got to play with the putty," or whatever it is. Right?

Travis: Also sometimes if you're lucky you'll get some, like, really good hot gossip.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Of just like, "Oh, well—" there was a kid, I can't remember his name, and that's probably for the best. But in her preschool where she'd come home and be like "Such and such made some bad choices today."

Teresa: Aww.

Travis: And I'm like, "Ohh, no, what happened?" And then I started to learn about like, well, this person likes to play with this person, but she likes to play with this person. And I'm like, "Oh, really?" And I'm into it!

Teresa: You're into that hot goss.

Travis: I cannot wait till she's in high school. I'm gonna be like, "Alright. Now, what happened with Derek and Judy today?"

Teresa: Uh, going back to what I was talking about—

Travis: Oh, sure, sure, sure.

Teresa: Activities. We've always loved dance in our house, but we are trying a new activity. We're gonna try soccer this year.

Travis: Ooh! And I almost... hey. Hey, parents. Um, if you're like me, we got an email that was like, "Hey. We need soccer coaches for this."

Now, listen, folks. I don't know anything about soccer. I barely know about soccer from *Ted Lasso*. That's it.

Teresa: [laughs] That's it. Well, Ted Lasso barely knew anything about soccer and look where he is now.

Travis: Right. And still— well, this is what I'm saying. So I saw this email and I thought, "I could do that."

What? Why would I think that?! So I did not sign up. I did not sign— because as funny as it is, I just pictured myself— the kids asking a question or— and then me having to google what that term meant, and I just couldn't do it.

Teresa: Um, so one of the next things I want to talk about is about children's mental health.

Travis: Oh yeah, very important.

Teresa: You may not be able to give your child the amount of mental health days that you did in preschool. For example, for us the new attendance policy is going to be something that we have to start figuring out, right? But we want to make sure that they aren't over-scheduled, so we're only doing two activities. Um, and you know, she's in kindergarten, but no college admission, like, team accolade or whatever is worth your child's mental health, right?

Travis: Okay. So to jump back to when we were talking about, like, getting ready and feeling rushed and getting ready, right? There can be times— like, I've noticed that there are some days where the person opens the door for Bebe to get out of the car and she's like, "I'm not ready." Right? And it is a little bit of a thing.

And in the moment there's no time to talk about it, and it's very stressful and stuff. And so I try to, later, you know, when she's home and after she's had some time to, like, settle in to being home say like, "Hey. So I noticed this morning that you said you weren't ready. When you say that, what do you mean?"

Teresa: Exactly. You can talk about, like, physical and mental symptoms of stress, things like stomachaches or racing thoughts or a fast heart, right? Fast heartbeat. And how you can deal with this kind of stuff doesn't have to be super elaborate. You don't need any kind of, like, counseling background in order to do this. Taking a few deep breaths is something that everyone can do, and you can coach your kids to do that. Or take a walk.

Travis: This morning, uh, Dot was a little bit frustrated about something, and I heard Bebe say, "Do you wanna take a deep calming breath with me? Do you wanna do balloon breaths or rainbow breaths?"

And I was like, "What?"

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: Anyways, Bebe's the best and I love her very much.

Teresa: Even just taking a walk, right? It doesn't even have to be outside. Like, go to the kitchen, get yourself some water. That's a good walk, a good task. Something that they can do to feel in control of their body again.

Travis: It's also, speaking of in control of their body, this is another thing that we've always kind of tried to work on, and it's especially tough once a kid goes out into the world, but working on consent of, like, if someone— because this is a thing I think that past generations didn't always focus on, where, like, even a family member, you know, an aunt or something would ask for a hug, and the kid didn't wanna hug. And they're like, "What? That's— no, go hug 'em. Go do the thing."

And it's like, no. If she doesn't want to, she doesn't have to, right? Especially as we get into, like, there are lots of other kids running around, and maybe that kid runs over and tries to grab 'em or whatever, pick 'em up or tickle 'em or anything like that. And making sure your kid knows, like, "Hey. If somebody tries to do that and you do not want that to happen, say no. And that is okay. If a teacher tries to hug you, say no. Walk away. It's fine." Right? 'Cause I'd much rather deal with a teacher saying like, "Yeah, it just kind of seems like sometimes Bebe doesn't wanna be touched. And we'd be like, "Yeah, dude! That totally makes sense." Than the other way around. You know what I mean?

Teresa: Right. Um, and if your kid is having a hard time, you can definitely validate "Yes, this is hard. Yes, this hurts sometimes." Things, you know, like the racing heartbeat or the stomachache, things like that. But you can try to explain to them that it's only temporary. Um, and you know, if you're— it won't always be this way, and it will probably turn out okay. Right?

Travis: And it's al— that's a good chance for, you know, uh— I always get 'em confused. I think empathizing. Of saying like, "You know, sometimes I feel like that too."

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: "And when that happens for me, what I like to do is this and this and this. What do you think would help you?"

And, you know. Because I get frustrated. Bebe gets frustrated. So I try— and I talk about this in just a little bit in the interview, in the discussion part of it.

Teresa: Exactly.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: So before we go to the interview, we did have a couple of listener questions I'd like to go over. Let's see. We got a question of, "Is it a faux pas to reply to discussion questions in online class with more... or double or triple... than the minimum required word count? I love to write, especially with the absence of talking," which makes sense to me. "But I don't wanna be a try-hard or be annoying. I just love to learn."

And so I'd first like to say, you're not annoying. But you can, you know, use your best judgment. If you have things to say, I'm certain that they are important to someone in the conversation. Um, and your teacher is probably happy that you're excited to talk about the subject. That's fantastic. Especially in online learning, we can kind of zone out a little bit, you know?

Travis: I wanna— I wanna say something real quick, 'cause I've been thinking about being annoying a lot.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: 'Cause I— um, I think that while you are not annoying, people might be annoyed by you. Right?

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: So think about it like an allergy. This is kind of how I talk to Bebe about it. Of, like, there are people who might be allergic to you. And they get annoyed by the way that you do things. That does not mean you are inherently bad. It means that their reaction to you is negative, right? That is not a judgment call on you. It is the way they interact with your behavior. And so there might be people that when you answer it that they roll their eyes or that they're, you know, sighing or something somewhere else.

That should not change the experience you are getting out of the thing, because if that's what you need to feel, you know, in place in this class and learning from this class, then you should be focused on your experience for it. You writing too much is not hurting someone else. It is not taking up their space. You know, I think that there's a difference between if this was, like, something you were taking too many turns at.

Teresa: Yeah, you should wait your turn and make sure that everyone has time to get their questions answered as well.

Travis: But you just giving a bigger, longer answer than somebody else does not take anything away from them.

Teresa: Exactly. Um, if you are regularly sending gigantic blocks of text novels, you can find a way to edit and be more succinct. I'm not saying don't write. I'm saying keep it simple, and to the point.

Travis: I also think that this is a good opportunity to, outside of the class session, email or contact the teacher in whatever way you want to. To say like, "Hey. As you've probably noticed, I like to give longer answers. Is that a distraction in any way? Is that something that is affecting class? Would you like me—" 'Cause I'm willing to bet it'll be like, "No, it's great. Shows that you really engaged in it and that you're, you know, you care about the answers. I love it."

Teresa: Here's the next one. "I work as a custodian. Is it okay to use facility educational materials like the library, for example? We are allowed to use recreational equipment like gym weights and basketball courts, but no specification for education equipment."

Now, I would like to say that if it is a finite resource that the students are using, I'd say no. Especially since a lot of that comes out of the teacher's pocket, and isn't provided by the school. But if it's not a finite resource, the library, absolutely you should be able to use the library. Um, and, you know, if it's— like I said, if it's not a finite resource— don't go using up art supplies or whatever— but yeah, you should be able to use those things as long as, you know, it says you're allowed to use recreational equipment specifically.

That's great, right? Not a finite resource. The library? Not a finite resource. If your school has maybe, like... uh, like a faculty pool or something, that's fantastic. You know, make sure that you're following all of the safety rules and correct signage and whatnot, but yeah. If it is not a finite resource, go ahead and go for it.

Travis: And if it's something that you're really worried about getting in trouble for, which as I've already stated, I often worry about getting in trouble for things, you know, go to a vice principal or principal or, I don't know, whoever is in charge these days and say, "Hey. Is it cool if I check out books from the library, or use the computers in there," or whatever. If I sit and play the piano in the music room if nobody's there. Whatever you want to do.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: I'm willing to be they'll say yes.

Teresa: I'm willing to bet, too.

Travis: As long as you're doing your job, too. Like, I think that's the other thing. You can *Good Will Hunting* all you want to, right? But just make sure that you're also doing your job.

Teresa: Right. The next one is, "If you're putting stickers or a kid's name on their school stuff, like notebooks and lunchboxes and stuff, what items should be labeled and which items should not?"

Here is a great rule of the road. Vessels and clothing.

Travis: Ooh.

Teresa: Okay? So—

Travis: Hey, I really like the word "vessels."

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: I know what you mean by it—

Teresa: That's a good one, right?

Travis: —but it also just, like... it conjured some very, like, fantasy-based things. Like, "You must fetch a vessel."

Teresa: So like if you have a specific gym uniform, the gym uniform, all pieces should be labeled. If it's something that comes off their body during the day like a jacket, or a hat, or gloves or whatever, those all need to be labeled.

Travis: Or a cape. I don't know.

Teresa: I don't know.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Um, other than that—

Travis: Are kids into cloaks these days? Is that... can we bring cloaks back?

Teresa: I'm sure some kids are into cloaks.

Travis: Oh, I'm just saying. Versatile. Versatile! Good on the— uh, good at school, good in the woods. Good if you're, you know, having to trek with some hobbits. You're going on an adventure, you need a good cloak.

Teresa: A good cloak is always good for an adventure. Um, and then as far as, like, vessels go, things like lunchboxes and backpacks and pencil cases.

Travis: Water bottles. I could go on!

Teresa: Well, so basically if you have the name on the vessel it goes in, for example the pencil case, right? There's no need to label every pen and pencil and crayon or whatever, or like the protractor or whatever kids use these days, right?

Travis: I don't think kids are using protractors these days. At least not in kindergarten.

Teresa: Not in kindergarten.

Travis: I don't think it comes up.

Teresa: Not until geometry, probably.

Travis: Maybe? I don't remember ever using a— graphic calculators, now...

Teresa: Ooh, yeah.

Travis: Now we're talking.

Teresa: Um, if—

Travis: And sometimes you can play games on them. Don't tell the teachers.

Teresa: [laughs] If the pencil box is labeled, it goes for everything inside the box too, right?

Travis: Right.

Teresa: So no need to label all of those sorts of things. There are a few things, like scissors, right? Scissors can often get lost in the shuffle. You put 'em in your

hands, you lend them to someone, things like that. I would recommend putting your name on your scissors, just so that they make their way back to you.

Travis: Yeah. I would say with supplies things, like anything that is more, like— more difficult to replace, you know? Like, when you're getting pens and pencils you expect to have to swap those out. But like, scissors, as you were saying, scissors, rulers, anything like that. Um, also anything your kid might sit down and leave someplace, you know? That you would want back.

And also, uh, along those same lines, make sure you check whatever the guidelines or guidebook is or whatever about stuff they can bring to school. Like, usually toys are— nowadays especially— are a no-go. So just making sure on that kind of stuff. And here's a trick. You don't have to get, like, fancy labels for anything. You can do, like, packing tape. Packing tape, right on the packing tape. And then put another piece of packing tape over it. Boom! Got yourself a name on there, baby!

Teresa: I love my fancy labels, though.

Travis: I know you like your fancy labels, but I'm saying not everybody, like, knows where to get fancy labels, right?

Teresa: [laughs] Uh, one last one. "What do you do with the hall pass in the bathroom?"

This is a really great question, and it's very specific to—

Travis: Flush it down the toilet.

Teresa: No!

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: It's specific to what the hall pass looks like, right? So some teachers have, like, safety pin passes or even, like, clothes clips, right? Um, if not, here's a great idea. Leave it on the sink counter, so that as you are leaving the bathroom going to wash your hands you see it right there.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Um, instead of leaving it, like, maybe on top of the toilet paper dispenser or maybe if there's, like, a sanitary trash can in there, I wouldn't leave it in there, because you're more likely to forget it there. If you put it on the bathroom counter, you'll see it as you leave.

Travis: Now, listen. If you're a school and you're listening, or a teacher or whatever, administrator, and you're listening, have a plan for that! Put a hook on the wall when they come in the door. Make sure there's a ring on the hall pass. Don't leave that up to the child to decide! They've got enough going on!

Teresa: [laughs] I like the ones with the giant sticks.

Travis: Okay. I'm not gonna lie, I like ones with big spoons on it that sometimes you get at coffee shops. That's fun!

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But then there's not always a plan for "What do I do with this giant spoon?"

Alright, listen. We're gonna take a break for some Max Fun promos, and when we come back we'll be talking with the authors of *A Case of the Zaps*, April and Alex. So stick around and we'll be right back.

[theme music plays]

[music plays]

Caroline: Are elephants right-handed?

Tom: What's the middlest size in the universe?

Emma: What is the history of fanfiction?

Tom: Let's find out together on our show, *Let's Learn Everything*, where we learn anything and everything interesting.

Caroline: My name's Caroline, and I studied biodiversity and conservation.

Tom: My name's Tom, and I studied computer science and cognitive [indistinct mumbling].

Caroline: Hmm, did you?

Tom: [wheeze-laughs]

Emma: And my name's Emma, and I studied stem cells and regenerative medicine.

Tom: On our show we do as much research as you would for a class, but we don't get in trouble for making each other laugh.

Caroline: And we get to say f—[censor bleep].

Emma: [laughs]

Tom: Maybe— maybe not in the trailer. [wheezes]

Caroline: Subscribe to *Let's Learn Everything*, every other Thursday on Maximum Fun.

[music and ad end]

[*Star Trek* comm noise]

[music plays]

Adam: Are you ready to binge watch something... old?

Ben: *The Greatest Generation* is a podcast about *Star Trek* by a couple of hosts a little bit embarrassed to even have a *Star Trek* podcast. Hosted by me, Ben Harrison...

Adam: And me, Adam Pranic. we get into the critical, the technical, the science fictional aspects of the show we love, while roasting it and each other at the same time.

Ben: We've completed an entire series about *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and another one about *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and we've just begun *Star*

Trek: Voyager, so now is a great time to start watching a new *Star Trek* series with us.

Adam: So subscribe to *The Greatest Generation* on Maximumfun.org, or wherever you get your podcasts, and become a friend of DeSoto today.

[*Star Trek* comm noise]

[music and ad end]

Travis: Okay. Uh, I'm really excited. Hi, everybody. We're back from... I don't know. Commercial? We're recording this first so I don't know where we took the break. But! Uh, we're joined by friends of ours, Alex Boniello and April Lavalle, and Alex, I definitely just mispronounced your last name. I know that that's true. What is it supposed to—

Alex: You know what's so funny? You pronounced mine right and you pronounced April's wrong.

Travis: Get out! What is it, April?

April: It's Lavalle.

Travis: [sighs] Man! I'm bad at names.

April: You were so close.

Travis: I'm so sorry. Um, so Alex and April are primarily just a Broadway power couple.

April: [laughs]

Travis: I believe is how their described. Not just Broadway, because the press release that I got for my friend Alex's movie on Netflix, *Love & Gelato*, is that it's "swoon-worthy." So apparent— and now, because it's about gelato, Alex, would you say it's also spoon-worthy?

Alex: Um, that depends. Actually, yeah, I'm not even gonna, like, all— I— only yes.

Travis: Only yes. Oh! An unqualified yes to my bad joke. Thank you, Alex. That means so much to me.

Alex: You're welcome.

Travis: Um, I've known Alex for a while now, ever since I wrote out on a piece of paper an excuse for him to get out of performing a Broadway show so that he could come to a *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* live show, which I don't think he used.

Alex: No, it didn't work, yeah.

Travis: Aw, man. I'm so sorry, bud.

Alex: It is still on the fridge, that's true.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: That's nice. Okay. But that's not the reason we have April and Alex on today. They have written, let's just say it, a delightful book— I almost said children's book, but I think it's applicable beyond that— called *A Case of the Zaps*. Um, Alex and April, do you want to tell us a little bit about the book, just right off the top?

April: Sure. It is a book... for children.

Travis: Good start.

April: But you can read it at any age. [laughs] Um, it's called *A Case of the Zaps*. It's about a Pi— uh, a robot named Pi, excuse me— who, you know, is just a normal kid robot living their best life when all of a sudden they're confronted with a scary and strange sensation called the zaps, um, in anticipation for an upcoming field trip to old silicon valley.

Alex: Yeah, that's pretty good.

Travis: Now— yeah.

April: Thank you.

Teresa: That could be the back cover. Like, that was right there. Great work.

April: I'm actually pretty proud. I just pulled that out, and I'm pretty proud of how I did there.

Travis: It was very good. Now, the zaps in this case is anxiety, right?

April: Yes.

Travis: It's a very, very good way to talk about anxiety, and the reason I said I didn't want to just call it a children's book is I really liked reading it with Bebe, because Bebe can be a pretty anxious kid. Uh, and I can be a pretty anxious human.

And I like that includes ways to, like, have the conversation about it with your kids as well as, like, it touches on ways to help and to process anxiety and stuff like that, and not just... it doesn't just, like— it's not just a cute story. There's helpful things in there as well for the conversation, and for helping the kid out, and for helping the parent out. Um, and you worked with the— the Children's Mind Institute. Is that the correct organization?

Alex: Child Mind Institute, yeah. They were really useful. So, the story about that really quickly is they're actually one of the partners that *Dear Evan Hansen* has for, like, their mental health outreach and stuff like that. Like, so during my time at *Dear Evan Hansen* I think kind of as a combination of the role that I played in that show— for those of you who don't know and aren't familiar with the show, I played Connor on Broadway for, like, two years.

Um, so a combination of the role and also my comfort kind of talking about it, I sort of became the, like, de facto "Go do the press event [laughs] for our mental health partners" sort of person.

Which I was very happy to do, and so I worked with the Child Mind Institute on a few different events, and they were always awesome, and always, always great, and they do exactly what it sounds like they do.

Um, and so when we were writing this book, we had said to our publishers— we're like, "Look. Like, if we're gonna write this, we really want to make sure that we are speaking correctly as, like, up-to-date, as efficiently... you know, even if it seems like it's like a little story about one character, like, the way that you

message these topics down to, like, even specific word choices and stuff like that really, really matters. So they had— they were awesome, and they had doctors kind of read drafts of the book so that if there was ever anything that was like— that stuck out to them, they could let us know.

You know, we're very happy to say we didn't have to do too much work, but our personal favorite one is if you remember at the beginning of the book, we establish that there is a robot Earth where the robots live. Um, and the initial draft of the book said something along the lines of like, "Yeah, it's like Earth! Like, long ago humans lived here, and now the robots live here."

Travis: Oh no! Well, yeah. Thank you— hey—

Alex: [simultaneously] Very good, very good.

Travis: As a parent, thank you so much for not making me explain that to Bebe.

Teresa: It just really op— it really closes that door as far as, like, all of those questions. "Well, what happened?"

Alex: Yes, I'm glad—

Travis: Don't worry. There's not skeletons right under the surface. Thank you so much.

Alex: You picked it up quick.

April: No, the editor said like, we don't have to give the anxious kids existential dread as well.

Travis: [laughs]

April: [crosstalk] kind of like—

Alex: [laughs] Right.

April: Yes, good point, good point. [laughs]

Teresa: Yeah. Well, um, I was actually wondering about, like, your specific target audience. Um, because we are doing this kind of like interview for you

guys, with you guys, as part of a back to school kind of how-to for our listeners. Um, and so I noticed in the illustrations that there's a lot of, like— there's a lot of, like, primary colors.

There's a lot of, like, bright sort of zaps and zops and stuff like that. What was— what was your thought as far as, like, the age group and how you talk to them differently than you would talk to, say, a different age group, like teens, right?

April: Yeah, that's a really good question, because our— I guess our target age group would be between the ages of four to nine, which is a really, really broad age group. Usually four-year-olds and nine-year-olds aren't reading the same books. [laughs] Um, but there's something, like, kind of for the younger kids with the words being kind of all robotified, I will say, with the text.

Like, words like zaps and spring and everything like that, kind of jump out off the page in a different font, and we wanted that because that's kind of how younger kids are gonna respond to the story. They're gonna like the pictures, the really fun, exciting words that they can kind of shout out. Um, but they might not super latch on to that anxiety storyline at that age. [laughs] But if you give the book to a nine-year-old, they could kind of understand more about, like, the subtext of the what the book is really about and relate to Pi in a different way.

I also kind of think Alex and I truly wrote this book for, like, our younger anxious selves in a way. Like, I think we were both kind of like anxious overachieving kids, and I kind of feel like the kids so far who have been reading it that resonate the most with it are those, like, super overachieving kids who, you know, adults put a lot of their pride and faith into, but kind of under the surface there's this, like, building pressure that they can't truly name yet.

I feel like the we kind of wrote the story specifically for that very niche group.

Teresa: It sounds like me and all my friends and everybody I knew in high school. [laughs]

Travis: Well, take it from me. I was an anxious underachieving kid, and it still spoke to me as well, so thanks.

April: Oh, good. Oh, good.

Travis: I did— I did a lot for me, but probably you guys would've been like, "You played video games a lot." And I'd be like, "I sure did, guys." Um, and it spoke to me as well.

Uh, I will say, two moments that really stood out to me, one that was very funny was the line "Give it to me straight, Dr. Bleep Bloop." Which is just— just great writing. That's just good writing, guys. I laughed at that. That's a great line.

April: [laughs]

Alex: I— I kind of giggle to myself every time I read that line. We've done a few readings, like, for actually children, like, kids. And like, I'm always laughing at that line to myself, and no one else is laughing. And I'm like, "I thought that was a funny line!"

Travis: Hey, you're right. That is well— "Give it to me straight, Dr. Bleep Bloop" is comic gold.

Alex: Appreciate it.

Travis: But there's also a moment where Pi gets, like, the confidence to talk about it with his friends, and discovers that another one of his friends also feels the zaps. And I think that that— it's a small moment, but I think that that is a huge, important thing, because it resonates that one of the things that we don't do enough in society is, like, normalize talking about our mental health and normalize, like, especially for children, like, processing, talking about those issues and not just saying, "Eh, everybody kind of feels— ehh, that's just nor— that's part of growing up. [unintelligible]."

To, like, have that conversation, give them the words to talk about it. And I thought that that was a really sweet moment.

Alex: Well, thank you.

Teresa: Yeah, it definitely helps to validate and to empathize, right? This is teaching these very specific skills in such a great, fun way.

Travis: Uh, one of the things we try to focus on when we, you know, do a topic on *Shmanners*, is try to do, like, functional, how— you know, very practical advice. So, like, you guys now have worked with the Child Mind Institute and made this

book. Like, what's some advice that you would give to, like, parents if they noticed— like, I tried to explain this to Bebe that everybody worries about stuff, but anxiety is different from that. So, like, how would you— what advice would you give for, like, you know, if you notice this and this, maybe talk to them about this kind of thing?

Alex: Yeah, I mean, what's so interesting about this is that, like, you know, we aren't experts on it. Right? Like, we're both dealing with our own versions as adults with, like, our own mental health stuff. And so the talking about it is fascinating, and it never— it's like one of those conversations that I think our entire lives will always continue to evolve as we deepen our understanding of all parts of it.

And I think that, um, something that April says a lot about a lot of, at least to me privately with, like, heavy topics and kids is a lot of times kids— and maybe you recognize this as parents— like, can handle more information than I think adults think that they can. You know, like a great example of this— and I'm going very roundabout and I apologize— but, you know, like kids with death for example, sometimes it's like, "Oh, no, the kid can't go to the funeral, or we're gonna ignore it. We're gonna pretend that."

When in reality, like, a lot of times the kid will be like, "Oh, that's what happened to grandpa. Oh, that's sad. Okay." And then they resume, you know what I mean, playing. So I find sort of the same thing with these kind of conversations, right? Is there's totally a way to, like, just be open and free with the conversation, and I feel like the kid will offer up as much as they are able to offer up in the moment.

And so I feel like it's sort of the parents' job to become as learned and as researched as possible when they start to notice these things so that when the conversation comes up it's not like a blindside-y thing, where you have to really worry about, like, traumatizing your child. I think it can be as simple as, like, "Hey. It's just so you know, it's totally normal to feel these ways, and I'm very aware that it can be scary."

You know, it's that line between presenting an issue, explaining the issue, talking about the issue, but not putting your own baggage on top of the issue so that the kid doesn't absorb it like a sponge and then, like— you know, it's really complicated. I don't know if I answered anything—

Teresa: I think you did.

Travis: [simultaneously] No, but I—

Alex: —but I did talk for a minute and a half straight.

Teresa: [laughs] There is that fine line that you're talking about. As far as, like, Bebe can understand that the Earth turns, and also revolves around the sun. And she, like, can think about all of these complicated things, when you explain them in a simple— in a simple but yet straightforward, like, way, right? And it's just learning that vocabulary to talk about feelings and worries and anxieties, and about expectations and coping mechanisms and all that stuff. It's just trying to sort it all out so you can be simple and still true. [laughs]

Travis: Yeah, and we try to, uh, as parents, like, model that behavior as well. The comfort of talking about feelings. Especially when it's stuff that's embarrassing. You know, like I— I— as connected with ADHD and just who I am, like, I have issues with, like, getting frustrated.

And just saying like, "You know, sometimes Daddy feels frustrated, and it feels like this." And it's hard, 'cause I see her get frustrated. And instead of saying, "You are frustrated and you need to do this," when I feel frustrated I say, "Oh, I'm feeling frustrated, and I know I need to do this, and it feels like this when I am frustrated, and I know that really the thing that's happening is this."

And, like, by talking about it I then see her at other times when she's feeling something say "Yeah, right now I just think I'm feeling this way." And it's just like, yeah, dude. That's awesome. You're doing great.

Teresa: Which was great to see in the book, too.

Travis: Yeah.

April: Yeah, we always say, like, the book is not prescriptive, because obviously we're not doctors, and it's a children's book. But, um— but, like, even kids are the experts of their own experiences.

So like you're saying, Travis, like, you can go in and say something along the line of like, "Oh, you must be feeling frustrated." But to stop and listen and give them the space to kind of word the things how they want to word it and express their

feelings in the way that feels true to them is making the kid the expert of their own experience.

And the first time an adult takes you and your feelings seriously is a very big deal for a lot of kids. [laughs] I know it doesn't seem like it, but the first time where an adult sits you down and kind of listens to you talk through something and looks you in the eye and says "Yeah, that might be happening. That is happening to you. And thank you for, like, telling me that."

More than knowing how to diagnose what's going on with your child in that moment, building that kind of rapport and trust with your child is going to be the most important thing to having the more difficult conversations as they get older, and they're gonna feel safer talking to their parents.

Travis: That's another thing that I really like about the book. Like, you mention having a child express their feelings in their own way. Of, like, by calling it a case of the zaps it makes me think about— I mean, it's not onomatopoeia in this way, but the way of like, a kid understands that, like, their skin is kind of buzzing that their stomach is doing flips and, you know, that they'll talk about like, "You know, I just feel like my body feels tight, and I feel, you know, like that."

And it's like, if you say "Are you feeling anxious?" And the kid doesn't know— you know, they don't have the vocabulary for exactly what that means they don't— but if you're like, "Does your stomach feel kind of bubbly? You know, do you feel, like, scared? Are you feeling like, you know, your hands are maybe feeling a little tingly?"

Whatever you want to say. And they can, like, tell you the physicality sensations that they're feeling is way better than, like, them trying to use these, you know, eight syllable words to describe their feelings. And so, I really like the way that that's laid out in the book, of that kind of feeling. It's great.

Alex: And what's so funny about that too is, like, you made me think of something as like, recently I with my own anxiety have been having a physical sensation that is new to my, like, 15+ year journey or whatever with anxiety. And I'm now laughing 'cause I'm sitting here being like, "Wow." Like, April will remember this. Like, I describe it as like, "It feels like someone cracked an egg on my head, but instead of the yolk, it's lava, and then the lava is rushing down my whole body."

And, like, I'm a grown man. And I'm still using that kind of very visceral language to talk about it. So yeah, I suppose we never grow out of that, I guess.

Travis: Well, thank you guys so much for joining us on this. I really think the book is absolutely lovely. Bebe really likes it. Um, she— for some reason the only big question she had is, "How does the oil spray out of the DW-40 can?"

And I was like, "Well, haven't you ever, like, squeezed a juice box too hard?"

And she was like, "Ah. He probably squeezed it too hard because of the zaps."

I was like, "Yeah, sure. Okay. Sounds great, bud. I don't know."

Everything else she was like, "No, I understand this, and I understand this. But why did the oil shoot out of the can?"

And I'm like, "I don't know, man."

April: [simultaneously] That is so funny. [laughs]

Travis: That's her. That's her whole deal. It's great. Um, but thank you guys so much. Uh, also before I forget, James Kwan, who did the illustrations for this— they're so cute. It's so great.

Alex: Yeah. They're so good. I— I love them so much and I just, like— when we got those first drawings April and I were both so delighted. It was unbelievable. It was like someone read our mind as to what we wanted the world to look like. I have over here in our little office the original— a few pages of the original pencil drawings framed up on the wall.

Travis: Nice.

Alex: It's very nice.

Travis: Now, where can people find *A Case of the Zaps*?

Alex: Uh, anywhere you get books. If you just google "*A Case of the Zaps*" you're gonna first be taken to Abrams, our publisher's website, and then from there it'll show, like, all of the places. But check your local bookstores, uh, because those are always the best places, in my opinion, to support. See if they

have it. If they don't, maybe they can order it. Or, you know, you could just go on the internet and buy it.

Travis: Uh, April, Alex, is there anything else you would like to plug? You wanna give out your socials or anything like that?

April: Oh my god, why did I think you meant my social security number?

Alex: No, April, literally—

Travis: [simultaneously] You know what, April? As soon—

Alex: So did I!

Travis: As soon as I said it was like, "What a weird way to say it."

April: [laughs]

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: "That sounds like I'm asking for their social security." I'm so sorry, guys! I don't do this a lot.

April: [laughs]

Travis: I apologize.

April: No, I—

Travis: To give out your social media handles.

April: Yes. Um, mine is on Instagram, april.lavalle, and if you DM me I'll just give you my social security number.

Alex: Right.

Travis: Okay, great. Perfect.

Alex: Right. And mine on Twitter and Instagram is alexboniello. I'm sure the spelling will be there, but just @ that. And I will not... answer any of your DMs at all.

Travis: That's fair, that's fair.

Alex: Regardless of social security number.

Teresa: That's a very healthy boundary.

Travis: Yeah. Alright, well, thank you both so much, and have a great day.

Alex: Thank you!

April: Bye, thank you!

Travis: Okay. That's gonna do it for us. Thank you all so much. Thank you again to Alex and April, make sure you check out *A Case of the Zaps*, available now. Uh, go to Maximumfun.org and check out all the other great Max Fun shows there. Uh, thank you to our editor, Rachel, without whom we could not make this show. Thank you to Alex, our writer and researcher, without whom we could not make this show. Thank you for listening. We could make this show without you, but why?

And, uh, make sure you go over to mcelroymerch.com, check out all the great McElroy merch there. We've got some live shows coming up on September 29th and September 30th. We're gonna be in San Jose. Uh, well, I say "we." *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* and *The Adventure Zone* will be in San Jose, and then on October 1st, *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* will be in Denver so you can get those tickets, as well as all the tickets for the rest of the year, at bit.ly/mcelroytours.

What else, Teresa?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Thank you to Kayla M. Wasil for our Twitter thumbnail art. That's @shmannerstcast, and that's where we got all these great listener-submitted questions for this episode. Thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook group, *Shmanners Fanners*. If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, go ahead and join that group today.

Also, we are always taking topic suggestions and idiom suggestions. So if you can, please email shmatterscast@gmail.com and say hi to Alex, 'cause she reads every single email.

Travis: And that's gonna do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required!

Travis: You've been listening to *Shmatters*...

Teresa: Manners, *Shmatters*. Get it!

[theme music plays]

[chord]

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