

Ep #171: When You and Your Kids Don't Agree: How to Stay Connected & Honor Their Autonomy



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Lisa Smith

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Welcome to *Real World Peaceful Parenting*, a podcast for parents that are tired of yelling, threatening, and punishing their kids. Join mom and master certified parent coach Lisa Smith as she gives you actionable step-by-step strategies that'll help you transform your household from chaos to cooperation. Let's dive in.

Welcome, welcome, welcome. Welcome to today's episode. If you're listening to this episode in real time, you know that we are a quarter of the way through 2024, which we've deemed the year of self-regulation. In keeping with our theme, today we're delving into a topic that hits close to home for many of us, navigating the differences in beliefs and values between ourselves and our children.

Now, I want you to imagine this scenario. You've instilled very deliberate morals, maybe religious beliefs, and/or family values into your child over the years only to discover that as they grow older, they begin to develop their own opinions and convictions that might diverge from yours. Can you imagine that?

The question becomes how do you, as the parent, maintain a strong connection with your child, tween, teen, adult while honoring their autonomy and individuality? That is what we're going to discuss today. I think many times as parents, we become desperate, focused, determined to ensure that we get their thinking right when it comes to these non-negotiables. That we get triggered, we catastrophize, we globalize. Oftentimes, we become emotionally immature, around these important topics.

Many of us have very little to no capacity to hold space for the possibility that our kids might actually grow up to have different minds and opinions and convictions of their own that deviate from ours. I mean, think about that for a moment.

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Now, here's the other problem. You may not even realize it's happening but it happens, dare I say to all of us. Over the course of our kid's lives, we become incredibly attached to the expectation that our kids will, if nothing else, grow up to have the same convictions we have in many areas. It might be sports teams, right? I mean, I totally expect my kid to be a Patriot and Celtics fan the rest of his life.

All joking aside, it might be areas of morals, right from wrong in your opinion, religion, family values, spirituality, a certain way of doing things, a certain way of celebrating things, a certain way of honoring things. You may not even realize it, but we do often become incredibly attached to the expectation that our kids will have the same convictions we have. It might be in the area of friendships or how you treat people.

What happens sometimes is that the child becomes an adult. Then sometimes the adult child chooses something for themselves. Maybe it's a lifestyle or religion or an ideology that differs from our own, that differs from the one we modeled for them all their lives, and we can become incredibly dysregulated by this quickly. We feel dumbfounded, scared, angry, confused, insulted, assaulted, embarrassed, ashamed. We can be tempted to withdraw from the relationship completely because we simply cannot accept this outcome.

I know this, especially having a 19 year old son who's a freshman in college. I have fears that he might reject some things that are really important to me. I, too, can be thrown into storms of great magnitude if I do not manage my thoughts and my expectations in this area.

Malcolm and I do not agree or align in every area of life. But what I've come to know deeply is that does not mean we cannot foster our connection and our relationship with each other, even when we don't agree.

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Recently a forward thinking mom posed this question to me. If you're telling me there's a possibility my child could one day shun the morals, religion, and family values I hold to the utmost importance, how do I stay connected to my kid, even when their opinions and values deviate from my own? It's a good question, yeah?

The answer is really two steps. Step one is to practice unconditional love. Step two is to avoid being attached to the outcome. Allow me to break each one down and examine the meaning and how to apply it. Let's begin with step one, unconditional Love. We talk about that a lot here, right. We proclaim it.

As Real World Peaceful Parent podcast listeners, we identify as parents who have unconditional love for our children, which is really we love them no matter what. We love them when they're showing us their light side, and we love them when they're showing us their shadow side. We love them the exact same. We know this to the very core of our being.

We want more than anything for our children to feel it, to know it, to believe it as well. I mean, that's why we're here, right? It's why we keep showing up week after week to hear these podcast episodes. Keep showing up by the way. You're doing a great job. I'm proud of you.

Unconditional love is why we do thought work, why we work to change our habits, why we're working hard to heal our childhood wounds so that we can make it very clear to our children through our words and our actions that we love them unconditionally no matter what. Yeah, you with me?

Sometimes this intention, this effort we're putting in, coupled with modeling our beliefs for them, it's why it's so devastating. It's why it's such a devastating blow to us when our adult or nearly adult or teen kids present or inform us or show us that they have differing thoughts, opinions, and beliefs about things.

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Suddenly the question becomes, how can I unconditionally love my child and stay connected to them when I wholeheartedly disagree with their beliefs or their lifestyle? I think it behooves us as parents to recognize the world today is very different from the world we grew up in. It is.

Now it is almost inevitable that in a large family, one of your children raised by the same parents in the same home could grow up to deviate from the morals and values you hold so vital to living a good life in some way in some category. To live in a way that is not only different from yours, but may even be drastically opposed to it.

It could be about sex before marriage, sexual preference, gender identity, using THC recreationally, becoming a vegetarian, stop being vegetarian, identifying with a different political party, choosing a different religion, not practicing religion at all, quitting a sport, or a dedicated hobby. It could be leaving a job to pursue a dream like being in a band or being a singer. It could be not going to college. It could be quitting college. It could be getting married really young. It could be not getting married at all, not having kids, etc. But this is the human experience.

It's one of the ways we as humans exercise our free will. I think that the peaceful parenting way is working towards staying connected with your kids, even when our opinions values and decisions deviate from each other's. Because the alternative might be negative, drastically negative. The consequence of denying connection or making any attempt to remain connected could be a complete loss of the relationship. As a parent and/or son or daughter. I promise I'm not here to scare you at all. That is never ever, ever my goal.

The whole idea for this podcast episode came about because I was reading a Newsweek article that really got me thinking. In this article published in Newsweek Magazine, the author estimated that 10% of adult children today are or will be estranged from their immediate families.

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One of the main reasons the article reports for the estrangement is the lack of acceptance of the adult child's choices. Children are no longer, adult children, I should say, are less willing to stay in relationships with immediate family if they feel like their values and decisions and opinions are rejected by their family of origin.

I think it behooves us to ask ourselves are we willing to pay that price? Only you can answer that, but I imagine the answer is heck no, Lisa. I don't want that. So tell me what to do.

Okay, listen to this, it is possible to agree to disagree. Harmony can happen in the agreeing to disagree. Even if that wasn't modeled for you as a child. Let me assure you your refusal of making this effort to at least agree to disagree will not change their thoughts or convictions. Let me repeat that. Harmony can happen in agreeing to disagree. Your refusal of making this effort to at least agree to disagree is not going to change them.

Can I respect your opinion while at the same time holding to my own values? That is the question. How do I get there? How do I respect your opinion and hold to my values? That my friend is unconditional love right there. Let me tell you, in my humble opinion, the world could use a lot more of that from all of us. Yeah? It's really simple. But it's not always easy to remember and put into action. How can I respect your opinion while holding my own values and my opinion. So good right?

Now if step one forces us to look at how we see and think about our kids, step two forces us to look inward. I think it's easy for the brain to seek out ways to influence our older or adult children and want to fix the problem, fix them, convince them when we don't agree. But I really, really, really believe the best way to influence our kids is through love and connection and acceptance. I'm sure you agree with that, yes.

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Well, if you agree with that then consider this. If you are cut off from the relationship, either by you or by your adult children, you are guaranteed to have 0% influence on your adult child in any category or in every category of life.

So I would pose to you does a teen, young adult, or even adult child, adult offspring feel more open to what you have to say if you are trying to change his beliefs or her beliefs or their beliefs? Or are they more open if you are accepting of him, her, or them as his own soul who's come to earth to have his own experience?

Let me remind you that acceptance is one of human's core basic needs. Another core basic need is autonomy. So if this is resonating with you, let me ask you this. What are some reoccurring thoughts or worries you have about your kids when we're talking about this topic? Maybe it's fear not knowing what her life is going to look like without the security of family as you know it.

Maybe you're driven to make this happen for them to completely conform to your values and beliefs because you fear he's going to miss out on the most meaningful things in life. Maybe you're driven by the idea that she won't be happy. If she deviates from what you believe in. Maybe you fret that he, she, or they are making choices that they aren't going to be happy with in the future. I get it. I really do.

But I ask you to consider this. I think what gets in our way when we have children, all of us, is that over time we have a vision in our mind of exactly how our kids are going to turn out. We have goals for them. We have dreams. Then along the way, as we're raising them, we become very attached to these goals, dreams, and vision. So the problem is not the goals and the dreams and the vision. The problem is the attachment to the vision, goals, and dreams that gets in the way of our acceptance when our kids deviate from it and impedes our connection with our children.

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The attachment could be I practice religion X. My vision is that my child or children will also practice this religion. It could be that I homeschool my kids. I've always dreamed of homeschooling my kids. My vision is that my children will be delighted and will always want to homeschool. They will never question it or ask to go to any other kind of school. It could be I affiliate with a political party strongly, vehemently. My assumption is that my kid or kids will affiliate with the same party their entire lives.

The attachment could be I went to college, and my plan is my kid will go to college and graduate. These things are very important to us. I mean, that's why they're called values. Over time, as we're raising our children, we become very attached to them, very attached.

Now, here's the thing. The danger is not in the vision, the plan, or the goal. The danger is in the attachment to the goal. Because the goal doesn't always work out. The plan doesn't always go as planned. The vision doesn't always happen exactly like we see it. What happens is we have a goal for our son, our daughter, our kids. He, she, or they are going to do X or believe in X or follow through on X or live the life of X. It really doesn't matter what X is.

Over time we become incredibly attached to the outcome. It's usually because either we did the opposite as a kid, and we want to shield our kids from the pain, or we become attached because we believe in this strongly, right. We're all for it. We know how good it's going to be for them. We are really convicted with our goals, our plans, and our values.

Even if we want to go a layer deeper, we've also become attached sometimes because when our kid accomplishes X or follows X, it's going to mean something about us as a parent. Something like I will be deemed a good parent if my child does or accomplishes or follows X. When we think about oh my gosh, if that doesn't happen, then we take it as a performance

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review of our parenting or worth. Where did I go wrong? Where did I screw up? Was I a bad parent? What should I have done differently?

We make it mean that their choice, we make that mean something about not only our parenting, but our value, our worth, and our humanity. Can you see that?

So the challenge I offer is number one, identify where you are really attached to the goal, the plan, the vision for your kids. Just think about it. Then number two, ask yourself can I keep the goal, plan, or vision, but let go of being attached to it. Can I let go or loosen it that it has to happen the exact way I have it planned? A step further, if it doesn't happen as I have planned or envisioned, I will still love my child, teen, young adult, or adult unconditionally, and I will communicate unconditional love for them even if I am disappointed.

I will tell you, this is work I am doing right now. I do not want to ruin my relationship with Malcolm by being angry, resentful, or think less of him if he doesn't accomplish the goal of graduating college that I am, admittedly, extremely attached to. If he does not live up to the expectations he knows we have of him, that will be painful enough for him. He does not need my pain piled on top of his pain.

This is work I am doing every day. I journal about this. I think about it. I work on lessening my attachment to the outcome. Because at the end of the day, I really have no control over whether he graduates college or not. I want it for him. I'm supporting him the best I can. But he has to want it and do the work and reach the end and accomplish it with all the requirements. I have no control. I can't make him do it nor do I want to, if I'm honest.

If I'm overly attached to this outcome, it will negatively impact the joy that I can experience with him and for him in other areas of his life if he does not fulfill my expectations, and I don't want to do that. I don't want to ruin our

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connection that I've worked so hard for and on over the last 19 years because he doesn't fulfill an expectation of mine.

I also tell myself that sometimes on the other side of that so called failed goal is a beautiful life. If we refuse to let go of our attachment to the outcome, not the outcome but the attachment, we could miss out on enjoying and being a part of our adult child's beautiful life.

Letting go of an attachment to a goal or plan is a decision. It's a choice. You can decide to honor your son or daughter and their choices and let go of your attachment to a particular lifestyle and not miss out on the beauty, which is this human that you raised. The decision is easy. But getting there does take some work.

Let me demonstrate this to you. Let's say that you're super attached to a belief or a goal or a vision or a plan for your kid. As you're listening to this, you're thinking you know what Lisa, I can't let go of that goal. There's no way. I have a goal for my kid of X. Okay, I get that.

But if you were told that your kid only had two months to live, would you let go of that attachment? Yeah, you would without a doubt. For most of this, this would be an easy and automatic yes. So it is easy. But it does take work. You see the difference? It takes the commitment. It takes working on changing the habit of being attached to the outcome.

What we have to do is replace our old habit of clinging to an outcome with a new habit of letting go of the attachment and being somewhat flexible and open. I want X to happen, but I can stay open and flexible along the way. This is truly unconditional love. This is what I wish for you and your kids. It's what I wish for me and mine. This is peaceful parenting. This is growing in your emotional intelligence and learning to self-regulate yourself. This is possible. You just have to choose. I want this for you, and I want it for your whole family.

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As we conclude today's episode, I want to leave you with this thought. Parenting is a journey of growth and discovery, not just for our kids, but for ourselves as well. By cultivating unconditional love and releasing our attachment to specific outcomes, goals, or plans, we can foster deep connections with our children and create a space where they feel valued, accepted, and supported.

Remember, peaceful parenting is not about perfection. It's about embracing the messy, beautiful journey of parenthood with an open heart and open mind. So good, right? Thank you for being open to this today. I honor your willingness to consider this. I'm very proud of you. Until we meet again, I'm wishing you peaceful parenting.

Thank you so much for listening today. I want to personally invite you to head over to thepeacefulparent.com/welcome and sign up for my free peaceful parenting minicourse. You'll find everything you need to get started on the path to peaceful parenting just waiting for you over there at www.thepeacefulparent.com/welcome. I can't wait for you to get started.

Thanks for listening to *Real World Peaceful Parenting*. If you want more info on how you can transform your parenting, visit thepeacefulparent.com. See you soon.