

**Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid:
A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith**



Full Episode Transcript

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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.

Hey there. Welcome to today's episode. Let me tell you. I could not be more excited to bring you today's topic on strong willed kids. Now, being a strong-willed person might have some very specific traits or adjectives associated with a strong-willed person. They're sometimes called headstrong, confident, stubborn, bossy, assertive, independent, and demanding. Do you feel me? A strong-willed person can also solve problems on their own and speak up for themselves. They love challenges.

My 16-year-old son epitomizes this 100%. Since he was born, we have called him a full contact sport. He is the reason why I am a parent coach today and have this podcast. He is my greatest teacher. In today's episode, Malcolm generously gives us a front row seat into the mind, the actions, the attitude, and the approach of a strong-willed kid. I hope you enjoy listening to this as much as I enjoyed interviewing him.

The goal today is to inspire you, especially if you have a strong-willed kid. The goal is to give you hope. Who knows? You might even walk away with a couple tips, tools, or ideas to use with your strong-willed kid or kids. I hope you enjoy the episode.

Lisa: I am so excited to welcome today's guest to our podcast. I can hardly talk without a big giant smile on my face. I am so excited to welcome my son Malcolm Smith as a very special guest to *Real World Peaceful Parenting*. Welcome Malcolm.

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Malcolm: Well, it's great to be here. I'm Malcolm. I'm Lisa's son. I'm 16 years old. One of my favorite hobbies is basketball.

Lisa: Awesome. So Malcolm, tell us what else do you like to do in your spare time?

Malcolm: Well, I like to drive, hang out with friends, and play video games.

Lisa: You're a big gamer, yeah?

Malcolm: I am a big gamer. Love it.

Lisa: You do really love it. Basketball, gaming, and friends. Probably your top three, yeah?

Malcolm: Yeah. Probably.

Lisa: Hanging out with Mom and Dad at this phase in your life, not so much.

Malcolm: Not really, no.

Lisa: Okay Malcolm. So here's the big question. Do you consider yourself a strong-willed kid?

Malcolm: Yes, I do.

Lisa: Tell us what that's like? Parents really, really, really want to crawl inside the mind of a typical strong-willed kid. So first of all, tell us how you define a strong-willed kid and then what's it like being one.

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Malcolm: Well, I think being a strong-willed kid has something to do with being competitive and always wanting to win. So, for example, you always want to argue and win the argument. Or you want to do it your way because you think your way is the best. Yeah. I think that thinking about being a strong-willed kid, you want to always defy your parents. Also you just always want to win at everything you do in life.

Lisa: What's that defying your parents about do you think?

Malcolm: Well, for example, like if your parents say, "Oh go brush your teeth in five minutes." Being a strong-willed kid you'd probably do it in seven minutes or ten minutes because you'd rather have control of the argument over the parent.

Lisa: I always teach parents that strong willed kids don't like to be forced to comply. Does that sound about right?

Malcolm: Exactly. You always want to do it the hard way versus the easy way if your parents suggest it.

Lisa: And be in charge, right. I say to parents the number one thing strong willed kids want to feel is in control of themselves and their surroundings.

Malcolm: Correct.

Lisa: So if I said to you go brush your teeth now, you just instantly don't want to do it. Yeah?

Malcolm: Exactly. I don't feel like doing that right now.

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Lisa: I tell the story, Malcolm, to parents all the time. You've probably heard me say it through the walls. That your favorite food in the whole world is Oreo cookie ice cream. If you woke up in the morning and I said, "You will have Oreo cookie ice cream for breakfast this morning." You'd be like, "No I'm not. I'm not having it." And you would not have it just because you don't want to be told what to do.

Malcolm: Yeah, that's true. It's happened multiple times. It's true.

Lisa: All right. So what does success feel like as a strong-willed kid?

Malcolm: Well, I think for thinking about small battles, I feel like success is like winning an argument or doing well on a test or something that your parents have helped you with. I think a lot of strong-willed kids want to see success on their own and not help externally with other people. I think like big achievements like making a team or something, they feel good because you've worked really hard for them. You've wanted to see this outcome for a very long time, but you haven't really felt like the need to ask for help. So you did it on your own. Because you made that team, it feels a lot better.

Lisa: Yeah. I know for your personally and many strong-willed kids it's really about experiential learning, right. Figuring it out for yourself.

Malcolm: Yes.

Lisa: My guess is you'd rather do it yourself and win or do it yourself and lose than have someone help you do it.

Malcolm: Exactly.

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Lisa: Why does that feel so important? I'm so fascinated with this.

Malcolm: I feel like it's just this feeling I get when I am doing it on my own. It feels a lot better. Also I feel like when you do it on your own, when you achieve that goal, it's like wow. I really finished that by myself. I didn't need any help. I think that feels really good for somebody like me.

Lisa: Do you strong willed kids tend to be friends with more strong-willed kids? Or do they tend to attract non-strong-willed kids? What would you say about the majority of your friends? Are they more easy going?

Malcolm: I have a little bit of both. I feel like some of my friends are extremely competitive and very strong willed. I can think of one kid right off the top of my head who is extremely strong willed. Anything I point out to him always has to argue and always has a say in it and will always get on my back if I say something stupid or something like that. But also, I have friends that are very easy going and will do whatever you want. So I think there's like a balance between having strong willed friends and non-strong-willed friends.

Lisa: Okay. Let's talk about this for a minute because I will never forget this, Malcolm. I will never in my life forget this. One day I was frustrated about something. We're driving down the road and I'm explaining to you, "Malcolm. Malcolm. Nobody likes to be arguing all the time and battling. Nobody likes to be having all this conflict." You looked at me and you said, "Mom, that's where you're wrong. Dad and I are perfectly comfortable with arguing and struggling and battling and having conflict all the time. You're the one that's not comfortable with it." Do you remember this?

Malcolm: A little bit, yes.

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Lisa: I was shocked Malcolm. Because I am someone who doesn't like conflict. I don't look for it. I don't enjoy it. I will work my way through it, but I don't love it. For you, you don't mind conflict at all, do you?

Malcolm: No. I mean I've had nights where I sat on X-Box and argued with friends on video games for two/three/four hours about something stupid. Like who would win the 2016 Golden State Warriors or the 1996 Bulls? Like we would argue about that.

Lisa: And it doesn't bother you at all.

Malcolm: No. I don't think it bothers any one of my friends that talk to me. I think that arguing, for me, is a way of talking. And because I'm so competitive, I feel like it's kind of like I need to become... Everything in my world needs to become a competition in a way. So yeah.

Lisa: That's so fascinating to me. My brain, sometimes I struggle to wrap my brain around it. Or I have to tell myself it's okay for us to power struggle a little bit at times because this is just who you are.

Malcolm: Yeah.

Lisa: Okay. So what's the best thing about being a strong-willed kid?

Malcolm: Probably I feel like wanting to win everything and being competitive is probably one of the best things I can think of.

Lisa: You love being competitive, don't you?

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Malcolm: I do. Also I think just in an everyday standpoint, I think being competitive especially because I play a sport really helps me. Because I don't wake up every day saying, "Oh, it's a new day. Time to go play some basketball and have some fun." I wake up every day being like, "Oh. Today is like a new day. So I should probably get a little bit better at basketball and become better over another kid and try to steal his spot on the team basically."

Lisa: Yeah. So if those listening don't know, Malcolm as he said, he's 16. He plays pretty high-level competitive basketball. I would say that not afraid of backing down, take no prisoners, not afraid of conflict or arguing or jumping in on a goal really helps you in your basketball career, wouldn't you say?

Malcolm: Yeah. I think another thing that helps becoming a strong-willed kid is having the determination to do something. I think anyone who's strong willed if they put their mind to something, they will achieve it 100%. I think if you put your mind that you will get an A in every single class. It's not like your parents tell you, "You know what? You should make this goal." You have to decide it yourself. If you decide that yourself, you will achieve it.

Lisa: By the way, feel free to decide that goal at any point.

Malcolm: I will.

Lisa: I agree with you. I think that strong willed humans change the world, right. You and I both know. We talk about this a lot. Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Michael Phelps, Tom Brady the GOAT. These are strong willed people.

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Another angle of strong-willed humans is just incredibly hyper focused. Right? Let's talk about this for a moment. You really have the ability when you're interested in something. I think this is another upside of strong-willed kids. I see this a lot in you and in your friends, in your basketball teammates, and in my client's children. This hyper focus. Talk about this. When you're gaming or out on the court, talk about that hyper focus. What is that world like?

Malcolm: I mean if there's something I enjoy, I will focus on it and look at the time and four hours will be by. I'll be like wow. That was quick. I think that becoming hyper focused is really nice to have. Because if I'm interested in a school project or something and I really get that hyper focused part, like I will get that project done in half the time I feel that other students will.

You know especially. I come home every day and I have little homework when I come home. That's because at school I'm very focused on finishing that schoolwork. Any chance I get to finish that homework, I do. So yeah. I think that has to do with just playing basketball and gaming. I think that's why I try to finish my homework as soon as possible. If you put your mind to something and say, "Well if I finish this, then I get to do what I want to do." Then I feel like someone would become very focused on that task and finish it a lot quicker than a lot of other people would.

Lisa: Yeah. I think the downside of hyper focused Malcolm is transitions are tough. Would you agree with that?

Malcolm: Yeah. I think sometimes when I get off gaming, I get like a little weird. If I get really focused on gaming, I need to take like a 30-minute break before I have conversations and start talking to people. Because I

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

was just so locked into that world of gaming that I need to like go lay down for a little bit. Maybe watch a little Netflix or something and just get back to like the real world.

Lisa: I think that's true when you're like at a tournament and playing intense basketball as well. Typically in the drive home, we don't talk. We just listen to music on the way home. It takes you kind of the whole drive home to come down from that hyper focus.

Malcolm: Yeah.

Lisa: I really notice that hyper focus when you're out on the court. One of the benefits I see in you is that you can block everything else out, all other distractions, and just focus on whatever you're doing. School project, basketball, gaming, running, weightlifting. You have this real keen ability to compartmentalize and block everything else out. Including your mother asking you to do things.

Malcolm: Yes. When I'm gaming, that is true.

Lisa: All right. So we talked about the best thing about strong willed. The worst thing. What's it like for you when you—I talk about this all the time. That strong willed kids don't like to be backed into a corner. They don't want to feel like they're forced to submit to someone else's will. So when you feel like someone is forcing you to submit to their will, what is that like for you?

Malcolm: Well, I shut down. I feel like I'll agree with them, but I'll shut down and not do everything to my best ability to what they've asked. So I think like if, I don't know, a teacher tells me to write a paper with a partner and I

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

want to do it by myself. I feel like I don't do it to the best of my ability because the teacher told me to do it with a partner when I know I would do it better if I did it by myself. So I kind of just get lazy and angry and focused on the wrong things. Yeah.

I had a coach who used to tell me I have to do this. I have to do this. I kind of shut down during the season when I was playing with him because I knew that he was wrong. And that I knew that our team would be better if I played a certain position and a certain position in the certain style of basketball. He would keep telling me to play another style. Because he's the coach, I had to listen to him. So I didn't really play the best basketball when I was playing for that coach.

Lisa: Yeah. But isn't it true that it was more not the information he was giving you but how he was presenting? He wasn't giving you a choice. He wasn't connecting with you. He was demanding cooperation from you. You will do this.

Malcolm: Yeah.

Lisa: That's like nails on a chalkboard to you, right?

Malcolm: Yeah. When someone tells me the word will, it really just gets me angry I would say. Yeah.

Lisa: Whether it's your mom, your dad, your coach, your teacher, your friend.

Malcolm: Yeah, anyone.

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Lisa: You hate being told what to do.

Malcolm: Yes.

Lisa: To the point that you will not do it just for the principle of it.

Malcolm: Even if it's something that will help me.

Lisa: Right. It's back to the ice cream thing. You will eat Oreo ice cream for breakfast. You would be like, "No, I'm not."

Malcolm: Exactly.

Lisa: Are you conscious of it when it's happening?

Malcolm: Yeah. I get extremely angry, and I'm like well, I don't want to do this. I know this is going to be bad for me. So I'm just not going to do it. Then I'm like oh, well, it could be better for me. Then I switch back and I'm like, well, I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he helped me or something like that. It's basically what happens.

Lisa: So it's entering into a power struggle, right?

Malcolm: Yes.

Lisa: So what advice do you have for parents? If someone is sitting listening to this right now and they're like, "Wow, it's like Lisa has my kid she's interviewing. That's exactly how my kid behaves." What advice do you have for the parents to create that connection rather than demanding cooperation?"

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Malcolm: I think a great way to talk to kids about just like doing things and stuff like that is taking them out to lunch or dinner or breakfast and having a conversation with them. Like kind of just bringing it up slowly. I think connecting with kids is a great way. I think that you and I, we talk daily. We always ask each other how our day was and everything. I think if parents would do that on a daily basis with their kids, kids would become more open to suggestions.

Lisa: I say that connection—Well I borrowed this from Brené Brown. Connection is when the other person feels seen, heard, and valued. So what I think you're saying is if the parent is taking the time to make sure the kid feels seen, heard, and valued, connection, then it's easier to open up and discuss solutions rather than the parent commanding solutions.

Malcolm: Yeah. I think that's true.

Lisa: Do you feel seen, heard, and valued in our family?

Malcolm: I do. I mean I talk to you and Dad daily. We have dinner once a week together at least. Like all sitting around the table having discussions. Obviously during dinner we have things we don't talk about, but we still connect with each other.

Lisa: Yes.

Malcolm: Yeah.

Lisa: In our family, we have topics that are off limits at the dinner table. Like grades, schoolwork, how hard Malcolm's working at basketball. Things that are upsetting, we table those. We really just talk about enjoyable topics at

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

dinner. We have political debates, and we talk about the stock market and we talk about the NBA. Then there's always the good old Tom Brady discussion. How great he is. Malcolm never minds hearing about how great his mother thinks Tom Brady is.

So we really do work hard at staying connected. I have a friend who says her kids don't always get their way, but they always have a say. I think, Malcolm, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this. I think one of the things that your dad and I do really well is we always make sure you have a say in a situation.

Malcolm: Yeah, I think so too. I think very rarely do I feel ganged up on. Like it's you guys versus me. I feel like it's kind of like everyone's got their own opinions and it's all different. So we all have a discussion. It's not like well you and Dad have an opinion and I have an opinion. It's always like well Dad has an opinion, you have an opinion, and I have an opinion. Let's come up with a compromise. So.

Lisa: So you feel pretty heard in our family.

Malcolm: I do.

Lisa: What do you think we do well as parents?

Malcolm: Well, obviously I think you guys do great on making us kids feel heard. I think also every parent has experience. I mean they've grown up. They've gone through childhood. So I think that a parent has a lot of experience and can share that experience with their kids so they don't go down the same rabbit hole as you do.

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Lisa: Specifically what do you think your dad does really well?

Malcolm: I think that he shares with me a lot of his thinking about stocks, about money, about life, about how to manage a company, about the NBA. I think all of those things I listen to and I always take in because he's a very knowledgeable man. I listen to him a lot because of it.

Lisa: I like that. What's it like having a mom that's a parent coach?

Malcolm: It's interesting.

Lisa: Yeah, I'm curious about this. We haven't talked about this in a long time.

Malcolm: I always find it funny listening to your conversations on Zooms for a little bit. Being like hey, didn't she just do that same technique to me last night? Then realizing oh yeah, she did. Then yeah. I find it really funny.

Lisa: Do you think I walk my talk?

Malcolm: Yeah, I think you do.

Lisa: Okay. Do you remember this? I want you to talk about this. I think you were in fourth grade, and I went on a trip. I went to Thailand for a couple weeks. When I got home, you were so happy to see me. I still remember this. You were so happy I was home.

One night Dad said, I think it was like the first or second night I was home. Dad said to me, "Do you know why Malcolm missed you so much?" I said, "Well, you know, I just think he missed me tucking him in and snuggling him

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

and being there for him.” Dave said, “Well, why don’t you ask him why he missed you so much?” So I asked you, “Malcolm, why did you miss me so much?” You said, “Because Mom kids need rules. Rules help us feel loved and they help us know what's expected.”

I mean for fifth grade, that was pretty wise. Do you remember? You may not remember this. Talk about rules. Talk about your love/hate. Like I would imagine...From my chair, you seem to be someone who in the moment hates rules, but then there's a part of you that appreciates what they bring into your life.

Malcolm: Well yeah. I hate rules. I don't like following them, but I do. Because rules have a certain structure to them. I feel rules, especially in family rules. They're not outrageous. They kind of keep you grounded. Rules also make you feel just like oh, well I need to do this. But I need to do this because the rule says it. But not just because of that because I know it's going to be better for me. I think as a strong-willed kid, rules suck, but they're needed. I'm not saying crazy rules. Like I think we have three rules in this house. We don't have a lot of rules.

Lisa: We don't.

Malcolm: Yeah. But the rules cover a broad topic. They're all about different things.

Lisa: I was Last Chance U, the basketball season. One of the coaches said, “Rules without relationship equals rebellion.” The head coach of the East Los Angeles Community College. Rules without relationship equals rebellion. I feel like with strong willed kids, you've got to have the

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

relationship and the rules. If you try to put rules in place without the relationship, all you're going to get is pushback.

Malcolm: Yeah, I agree with that.

Lisa: So what advice do you have for parents of strong-willed kids? Give us one thing they should do and one thing they shouldn't do.

Malcolm: One thing they shouldn't do is probably tell the kid, "You will do this." I think a great way to tell a kid to go brush their teeth like, "Hey, why don't you go brush your teeth and, I don't know, tomorrow night you can have ice cream or something like that."

Lisa: Well choices, right. Do you want to brush your teeth now or in five minutes?

Malcolm: Something. Yeah. I think parents should connect with their kids. Set rules in place and talk them over with your kids. Because strong willed kids are going to want to negotiate those rules. So I would probably set a little higher of rules so the kids can negotiate, and they feel like they have a say in the rules.

Lisa: Interesting. What an interesting tactic Malcolm.

Malcolm: Hm. I wonder who I learned that from.

Lisa: Hm I wonder. But you're saying gain consensus, and let the kids have a say in the rules. Don't just come in and say, "Okay, your bedtime is going to be 9:00." Like say, "Hey, I'm thinking about setting a bedtime. I'm thinking 8:30. What are you thinking? Then we have some conversation

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

about it. Then we negotiate it a little bit. Then we settle upon the ultimate time of 9:00.” Then don’t you think then that then the parent’s real job begins of enforcing the 9:00 bedtime.

Malcolm: Yeah.

Lisa: Because as a strong-willed kid, the kids are going to test the parents every single day, aren’t they? Let’s talk about that.

Malcolm: Yeah. I mean bedtime is interesting for us in the Smith household. I feel like I always want more time. I feel like I never finish a show on time. So yeah.

Lisa: But not just bedtime though. I feel like one of the things of strong-willed kids it’s they’re going to test parents on every little thing. You’ve got to hold the limit otherwise you lose credibility with the kids, right?

Malcolm: Yeah. I mean I’ve had teachers and coaches how they don’t hold limits like that. Then I just don’t...Like they don’t have as much credibility or anything like that with me. It really just ruins the relationship with the adult and the kid.

Lisa: Yeah. Like let’s say a coach says, “Practice is every night at 7:00 or three nights a week at 7:00. You need to be on the court shooting baskets shoes on by five to 7:00.” And he saunters in every night at ten after 7:00. We’ve had those coaches, right? You’ve had those.

Malcolm: Yeah.

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

Lisa: Then suddenly being there at 7:00 no longer matters because they're not holding the limit. Or they say 7:00 and a kid comes late. Some kid comes every week late to practice and the coach ignores it.

Malcolm: Yes exactly.

Lisa: That really irritates you, does it not?

Malcolm: Yes, it does.

Lisa: Because rules need to be enforced. If you're going to set the rules, follow through on them.

Malcolm: Exactly.

Lisa: All right. How do you get strong willed kids to do things like get off their phones, stop gaming, brush their teeth, or do their chores? What advice do you have for parents there? Including myself. Please advise me.

Malcolm: I would say give them like a time and a list. Be like, "At 9:00, I would like you to be off gaming, have your teeth brushed, and be ready for bed." I think that really helps me. Like you text me. Over the summer we had an agreement where if I had chores to do for the day, you would text me those chores in the moment so I could expect those chores. I feel like strong willed kids hate to be startled with like jobs and stuff.

Like when parents come in and be like, "Can you please do the dishes now?" I'm gaming. It's like well, I can't do it now, but I can do it in five minutes. I feel like parents get really annoyed at that. So if parents would say, "Hey, I would like you to go to bed at 9:00. So can you have this, this,

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

and this done before bed that would be awesome.” I think that would be a great way for parents to tell kids what to do.

Lisa: Rather than being demanding and barking and angry all the time.

Malcolm: Yes.

Lisa: That’s good advice. What should the parent do if the kid doesn’t do it?

Malcolm: Well say, “Hey you didn’t do this. What happened?” And talk to them. If they say, “Well, I forgot.” Then be like, “Okay. If you forget next time, there will be a consequence.” Let the kid know that you messed up once. That’s okay. But next time there will be a consequence and you will not like the consequence. So the kid won’t mess up again.

Lisa: Okay. I think that’s good. Make it clear.

Malcolm: Yes.

Lisa: Okay. So we’re going to end with you asking me two questions. Ask me two questions because I think people want to know more kind of about how we make this work.

Malcolm: Okay. If you are really angry at me, what do you do?

Lisa: Good question Malcolm. Well, the first thing I do is I check in with myself to see if I’m triggered or if I’m regulated. Because I try really hard to never, and I don’t always get it right. But I think I do a pretty good job of not approaching you until I’m calm and regulated and in my higher brain so that I’m not feeling out of control and getting into a power struggle. Sometimes I

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

have to wait a while until I feel calm and ready to approach you, but that's the first thing I do.

Malcolm: Okay.

Lisa: Do you agree with that?

Malcolm: Yeah. I think so. I think that you usually step away if I've made you angry. That makes me think oh wow, she's pretty angry. How about I just stop doing what I'm doing and just have a discussion with her? Then you come back, and we have a nice discussion about something. And my second to last question is what do you think about when you want to set a regulation, a bedtime or something like that? What do you do to kind of like negotiate or something like that?

Lisa: Good question. If I want to put a rule in place, the first thing is I think about it for a long time. I think about a couple things. I think about why do I want to put this rule in place? What's my reasoning? Because I always want to have a good reason. I grew up in a household where because I said so was the reason most of the time, and it used to irritate me. What happened is then it would be well why?

It's funny because you hardly ever ask that. I think it's because I never just say because I said so. Like you're a human being too, and I really feel like you deserve to understand. You may not grasp it, but you deserve to have the reason behind it explained to you.

So the first thing I do is I question why do I want to put this rule in place? Then I ask myself what family value of ours does it reflect? Then I ask myself what are all the areas you're going to push back on it? Where's that

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

conversation going to go? I try to just really think about what are you going to have issues with? And then does it pass the smell test? That's my process.

Malcolm: Yeah. I think you do a good job of setting regulations because it's always reasonable, I feel like. It's not a lot of room to negotiate. It's not outrageous. It's not like you say, "All right. Bed tonight at 8:00." I'm like well what?

Lisa: Some nights I want to. Let's be honest.

Malcolm: Yeah.

Lisa: You and sleep. You hate going to sleep.

Malcolm: I hate it.

Lisa: But you need it.

Malcolm: I love sleeping, but I hate going to sleep.

Lisa: Yes, but you lead such an intense lifestyle. You are so busy and on the go and have so much going on that if you don't get your sleep, it's just downhill from there.

Malcolm: Yeah.

Lisa: All right Malcolm. Well thank you so much for being here. I appreciate it. I love you with my whole heart. I think you're an amazing human being. I'm so proud to be your mom. I'm so proud. I appreciate you coming on and

Ep #14: Understanding a Strong-Willed Kid: A First-Hand Account with Malcolm Smith

sharing your thoughts with parents of strong-willed kids. I know everybody's going to benefit from listening to this. So thanks Malcolm.

Malcolm: Thank you. Thank you to everyone who's listening. I'm happy to be here. Thanks for having me Mom.

Lisa: You're welcome. Bye bud.

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.