

Ep #31: Setting Limits: Stop Punishing and Start Guiding Part 1



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With Your Host
Lisa Smith

[Real World Peaceful Parenting](#) with 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 to today's episode. I so hope this episode finds you doing well and healthy. We've been on an absolute roller coaster ride in our house. July saw the winddown of a successful but tiring AAU basketball season, a positive COVID test for me, and the decision to further support our son's dream by changing schools.

So whew, man. What a roller coaster ride. With that ride came some big emotions, meltdowns, and storming. It's funny because in the path I would have gone through a month like July and made it mean something awful. I would have made it mean I'm a bad mom or we're a broken family or something is wrong. We can't handle things, or this is so stressful. Now I just remind myself that conflict is growth trying to happen. I hold space for it to happen. For us to navigate a new terrain, and for us to feel our feelings and grow individually as a family.

Children need support and safety to grow. They need room to make mistakes, sometimes over and over and over again. And at the same time, they need to be coached and supported into learning the lesson, not scared, or punished into obedience.

That's what I want to talk about today. How to coach and guide into learning rather than scare or punish into obedience. As we dig into today's episode, let me remind all of us that this real world peaceful parenting community is a safer place. There's never any judgment from me or anyone else. I know that all of us, every one of us including you, yes you. I

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know we're all doing our best, and I know we all love our kids very much. I know that because if you didn't, you wouldn't be here.

Now I do want to ask you to listen to today's episode with an open mind. I want to ask you to suspend judgment or defensiveness, and just consider the information no matter how you've parented in the past and no matter how you were parented.

Now, let's review what we've covered in some previous episodes. Number one, feelings are never in conflict. Your kids are allowed to have their feelings, and you're allowed to have your feelings. We, as humans, should never tell someone how they feel. Yeah? Great.

I also want to review the anger model that we've talked about in a previous episode. I always like to invite you to think of the anger model as a volcano, right? Think about drawing a volcano on a piece of paper. At the base of the volcano is unmet needs. When our needs are being met, there's no anger.

When our needs are not being met, feelings bubble up. The lava is created. The lava is the feelings, right? Feelings arise from unmet needs. Maybe from you as the parent it's a lack of sleep or a lack of exercise or you're behind at work or you need more adult stimulation, or you need to know what your kids are doing, or you need to feel more connected to your spouse.

When these unmet needs happen, feelings build. When the volcano builds up, the lava spews out the top. When the lava comes out the top of the volcano, that is an expression of your anger, right? Then we have behavior as a result of our feelings. Like yelling or planking or slamming the door or silencing or walking away. All of that really fits in the category of punishing.

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As real world peaceful parents, what we want to commit to and work on is not letting that anger build. Because when the anger builds and the behavior spills out the top, the anger takes our brain offline. When we're angry, we want to take a moment to regulate and pause rather than punish from a place of anger.

Another thing that I want to review that we talked about in a very early episode is that peaceful parenting is about having a connection with your child. Using your power and your fully developed brain and your emotional intelligence to come alongside your child and guide them. Peaceful parenting is also about valuing the relationship with your child over controlling the behavior of your child in that exact moment. I really want to encourage all of us to look at our philosophy and our approach when something goes wrong or when there is a mistake or blow up happening with our kids.

So I always like to ask you questions and get you participating and thinking while I'm delivering the episode. Today's first question is how do you react? Take a minute to think about this. Be honest with yourself. How do you react when something goes wrong? Like your kids are fighting or your child lies to you, or your child won't listen to you, or your teenager goes somewhere other than where they said they would or they're late for curfew. When your child does something wrong, makes a mistake, or storms, how do you react? That's question number one.

Question number two is when your child makes a mistake or does something wrong, what is your goal? What goal do you have for you and them and the relationship? Hopefully the goal is something like, "Well, I want them to not do them again. I want to guide them or teach them right from wrong. I want to guide them around our family values. In our family, we don't do that. In our family we believe this. In our family we strive for this."

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As the parent, I want you to think about acting as the emotional coach who facilitates problem solving, right? That's the goal when our kids make a mistake or screw up or do something wrong. To act as an emotional coach and facilitate problem solving. Who knew? I sure didn't. I used to get up a whole head of steam to punish, yell, threaten, and take away things from my son.

I'm certainly not proud to admit this. It's still hard to talk about. What I can tell you is that I mostly did it because it's all I knew from my upbringing. This might be all you know. You might never have asked yourself what's my goal and what's my strategy? You might just find out that your kid has done something wrong. There's been fighting or lying or getting up in the middle of the night to get on the iPad or saying homework's turned in when it isn't. Your brain may think that you need to get an entire head of steam up. You need to get really angry and go into action like yelling, punishing, threatening, restricting, taking away. Maybe spanking.

I want to tell you that there is another way. If you're anything like me, I used to marinate. The way I would get up the head of steam is I would marinate in thoughts like, "My son doesn't listen. He's so disrespectful. He should know better. I told him not to do that. I told him to do that. He should really listen." Which is code for obey. I think a lot of times when we say our kids should listen, what we really mean is they should obey and do it exactly as I said, right. This was definitely the different thoughts that I marinated in. I would use these thoughts to fuel my anger. I would use the anger to take action like punishing or threatening.

What I know now is that punishments can severely or negatively affect your child's self-esteem. Punishments disconnect us from our kids. The whole process of getting up a head of steam to go at our kids disconnects us from our kids. When we punish, the punishment and the anger and the head of

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steam is often born out of our own unmet needs. Sometimes it's born out of just not knowing a different way.

Now the challenge with punishing our kids is that it creates resentment with the kid oftentimes, and it often leads to power struggles and in some instances further acting out on the kid's part. "I'll show him. Oh yeah? He thinks he can tell me that? He thinks he can take that away? Well, let me show him." Then it becomes a power struggle. That doesn't get anybody anywhere.

When we punish from anger, we teach our kids that when we make mistakes, they will be punished rather than given empathy, understanding, and guidance. It erodes the trust and disrupts the bond between you and your child that allows the child to be confident and flourish. Punishments also don't teach the child how to direct their behavior, which can lead them to being easily influenced or others later in life. What we really want to do is turn on the internal compass. Punishments don't always fit the crime. Sometimes we go overboard, we exaggerate, or we go too far because we're not regulated and we're not thinking calmly.

I remember there was an episode on *Modern Family* where Claire and Phil Dunphy cancelled Christmas. It lays it out so well in the 30 minute sitcom where the kids are not behaving and they're struggling and they're storming. Claire and Phil are getting more and more and more worked up. They're getting a whole head of steam worked up. Finally Phil opens his mouth and says, "And because you did this, that, and the other, I'm cancelling Christmas."

Then there's this look where Claire and Phil look at each other like, "Oh lord, what did we just do? We threw it out there. Now what are we going to do? Are we going to follow through? Are we going to have to backtrack?" Right? It's hard to backtrack. It's hard to take things back or edit ourselves

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when we've gone too far. We often regret the punishment that we've laid down, the hammer we've thrown down.

Often times the punishment doesn't fit the crime. Often as the parents we regret how we approach the punishment. The things that came out of our mouth. The way we behaved, what we accused our kids of, the names that we called them. So this is just another reason I'm not a big fan of punishing our kids because it all leads to disconnection, and it erodes the trust.

When you punish from a place of anger using things like blame, shame, harsh language, you're saying to your kids—you're modelling to your kids—this is how we behave in our family when someone makes a mistake. We get so angry that spit's coming out of our mouth and our face is beet red and we're screaming at the other person. We're taking things away and we're limiting and restricting. We're trying to bare down and cause pain on that person. So if you go this route, don't be surprised that this is how your kids treat others and themselves, including their siblings. Because this is what you're modeling for them. I know it's hard to hear, but it's oh so true.

Another reason I'm not a big fan of punishing is because strong willed kids often get fixated. Those of you that have a strong willed kid, you're going to know exactly what I'm talking about here. Strong willed kids often get fixated on the punishment. They get so fixated on the unfairness or the unjust or how angry they are about it that the original lesson you're trying to coach or teach, or guide gets lost. They start to ignore it, and they only fixate on the punishment. Then what ends up happening is you end up frustrated. They're frustrated. You're angry. They're angry. The original lesson is just completely lost in the conversation.

Believe me. I know this one to a T. This is one of the original reasons I started looking into conscious parenting because it felt like when I worked up that full head of steam and I set out to punish my kid, it didn't work

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anyway. We didn't get anywhere. Oh it was so maddening to me. It was really a motivator to move away from punishing.

Also when we're in that state of anger and our child is also worked up feeling blame and shame and dysregulated him or herself, they often can't even hear what we're saying. Because the fear and the cortisol and the shame is blocking their hearing. This is proven this happens. When we feel blame and shame and fear, we're secreting that powerful hormone called cortisol. When we secrete cortisol, it blocks our hearing. The child often can't hear us because of fear and cortisol.

I don't know about you, but I certainly fall into this camp. When I feel shame, I can't learn the lesson. I can't really take in or hear what anybody's saying to me because I'm so buried in the shame and the cortisol. At best we just learn how to not get caught, but oh the shame. Oh it's such a horrible feeling.

Okay. Maybe you're thinking right now, "I hear you. I hear you, Lisa. You make a good argument. I don't want to punish my kid, but this is all I know. So tell me what should I do instead? How do I guide my kids? How do I teach them? How do I parent them and teach them consequences? I don't want to punish, but I also don't want to be a permissive parent." Well, I'm so glad you asked.

Let me introduce you to your peaceful parenting tool called setting limits. Setting limits is using your power with or alongside your child. It's guiding and teaching them and working with them to learn the consequences of their actions. I love Ruth Beaglehole's definition of setting limits. She says, "Setting limits emerge from the parent's responsibility to keep their kids safe, to teach them the skills of being in social relationships, and to teach them the values of the family." Right? This is the goal. I asked you earlier

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what is your goal when your kid does something wrong? So let's set some new goals, or let's define the goals.

Setting limits allows us to keep our kids safe, to teach them the skills of being in social relationships, and to teach them your family values. This is our goal when we set limits. Setting limits is the process of supporting and teaching your child while being clear with the request and letting your child know what the limit or consequence will be.

So this is how we do it. Setting limits is a process of supporting and teaching, "This is what we do in this family," while being clear, "I want you even when you get upset to not hit your brother. If you choose to hit someone, this is what will happen. This is the result." Setting limits is the beginning of the conversation whereas punishing is the end. "I've taken away your iPad for a month, and that's it." End of story, right?

Whereas setting the limit is the beginning of the conversation. "You violated a family rule. How can you make that up to us? How can you make restitution? How can you fix this? How can you repair? How can you resolve? Let's talk about it. Let's decide what's the best course of action." That's setting a limit. Setting a limit gives a voice to your child, to his or her feelings and needs.

I say it all the time. Our kids want to feel seen, heard, and valued. Setting limits is a philosophy of allowing us to say yes to our kid's feelings while we're saying no to behavior. "I can see you're very upset with your brother that he won't share that toy, and you're very frustrated. I can see that. I want to remind you that in this family, we don't hit when we're frustrated. Let's talk about how we're going to fix that. Let's talk about repair."

Think about setting limits as upfront, values based. You're giving your child choices. "If you choose to do this, then this is what will happen." I've said

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before in a podcast the number one thing our strong willed kids want is to feel in control. So we're letting them know upfront if you choose to hit somebody then we're going to sit down and have a conversation about it. Then we're going to talk about hitting is not allowed. Then we're going to take a break from playing for a few minutes until we feel ready to rejoin or until we feel ready to apologize.

Another example might be, "If you choose to get on your iPad during times that you're not allowed, if you choose to do that—sneak it, jump on it, break the code and get on it—then we'll need to take an iPad break for a couple days. That's your choice. If you choose, daughter, to do that, then this is the consequence. I want to let you know that upfront."

Because when we let our kids know a limit upfront, we're in our calm state. We're regulated. We're communicating it to our child at a time when they're regulated. We're teaching them the family rules. They're feeling in control because they have a choice, right? You're going to present the limit "if, then", and then they're going to decide if they're going to follow it or not. They already know the consequence if they choose not to follow it.

I remember when my son was in junior high, and he first got his cellphone. He would get on his phone in the morning, and it would cause us to be late for school. So we set a limit that if he chose to get on his phone in the morning before we were in the car on the way to the bus then he would lose his phone for the rest of the day. Most of our kids when we set a limit, they're going to test it. Does she mean it? Is she serious? Is she committed? Is she going to stay consistent?

So of course one morning I walked into his room, and he was sitting on his bed on his phone. Because we had reviewed the limit over and over and over again. We had typed it out and signed it and put it up on the fridge, I put my hand out and said, "Hey, what's going on? I see you're on your

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phone. What did we discuss?" He was very disappointed in himself. Very. Couldn't believe that he was going to lose his phone for the day, but he knew that was the consequence.

He even said to me later. "Mom I knew this morning when I got on my phone, I knew it was going to be a problem." I was like, "Yeah. You made a bad choice. You could have made a better decision, and you'll get your phone back tomorrow." Right? So I was able to set the limit when I was calm. It wasn't a surprise to him. We didn't power struggle over it. I didn't go into my, "Oh my goodness. He's so disrespectful. I told him not to be on his phone. Why does he do this?" I didn't get up a whole head of steam. We'd already made a decision of what the consequence was going to be. At that point, my job was to just follow through.

Now, here's the rub on setting limits. It's the follow through. It requires on our behalf as the parent's commitment and consistency. It invites us to self-regulate. It invites us to stay in our regulated state while we're communicating with our kids. The beauty of that is that helps our kids learn to stay regulated over time when a mistake has happened. Setting limits develops emotional intelligence for both us and our kids.

It works better than punishing, I promise you, once you get the hang of it. It feels way better, like a way better way to parent. Because, again, we're calm. We're regulated. We've thought the consequences through. We don't need to get up a whole head of steam. We appreciate that our kids are going to make mistakes.

Setting limits are carefully and consciously planned. They don't emerge from the unconscious patterns of control or punishment that you might have experienced in your upbringing. It's a different philosophy. It's a different approach.

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Setting limits is based in a basic understanding of developmentally appropriate expectations of your child, of their temperament, and of your family values. So you're setting your limits around their age, what they're capable of, what their temperament is, and what you believe as a family. Setting limits is not a demand coming from an expectation of complete obedience, rather a process of teaching and supporting.

I feel like I need to repeat that. So let me say it again. Setting limits is not a demand coming from an expectation of complete obedience but rather a process of teaching and supporting.

Let me ask you. Do you learn better in an environment where someone is demanding something from you? Demanding or expecting complete obedience? Or do you learn better in a process of teaching and support? 100% of the time the answer is a process of teaching and support. 100%. That is true for your kids as well.

Now, again, it's hard to admit. If I'm totally honest with you, I thought parenting was demanding and expecting complete obedience. The problem was is I was never going to get complete obedience from my kid, nor do I really want it. I realized that complete obedience is not the way to go. The problem is because I was expecting obedience, when I didn't get it, I worked up this head of steam. Then I punished and I shamed, and I blamed. So I dropped the expectations of obedience. Now I have a process of teaching and supporting.

We've talked about this before, but peaceful parenting is valuing the relationship with your child over the behavior in the moment. Setting limits is a way of releasing you from the expectation that we don't always have to have the right answer. It's setting the expectation that things are going to go wrong. You may not know how to deal with it in the moment, but the philosophy allows you to circle back around to the conversation. It allows

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you to take a moment to regulate. It allows you to set the limit from a place of calmness and regulation rather than a big old head of steam.

Maybe after a big mistake, you ask your child, “How can you make this right? How can you make restitution from your mistake? How can you repair the relationship?” Maybe you invite you and your child to take time to think about it and then come back together to discuss it and come to a conclusion and set a limit for next time?

Children need support and safety to grow. They need room to make mistakes. Sometimes over and over and over again. They need to be coached into learning the lesson, not scared, or punished into obedience. Oh, this was such a game changer in my approach to parenting. Such a game changer when the lightbulb went on for me. I really understood that my kid needed to be coached into learning the lesson not punished into obedience. Yeah? Is your body tingling all over right now? Are you like, “Oh wow. Yes Lisa, yes. I want that.”

Okay. So let’s recap. Setting limits are carefully and consciously planned. They don’t emerge from the unconscious patterns of punishing that you might have experienced. It’s a different way. It’s a different philosophy. It’s a different approach. Setting limits are based in a basic understanding of your child’s age and their temperament in your family values. They’re not demands coming from an expectation of obedience, rather a process of teaching and support.

When we set limits, we’re giving a voice to our child and to his or her feelings and needs. Setting limits is upfront and values based. It’s the beginning of the conversation, not the end. As the parent, you get to set the limit from your calmness, from your higher brain, from your regulation. You communicate them to the child at any age when they're calm and

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regulated. The benefit of this is that over time, it turns on the internal compass for your kid.

The other benefit is that if you have a strong willed child, it helps them feel in control. Because they have a choice. They can follow the rule and reap the benefits, or they can break the rule and understand the consequences. That's all laid out to them upfront. You present the limit and then they get to decide. So they feel in control. You're also in control because you've set the limit up front, and you've set it based on their age and their temperament and your family values.

Alfie Cohen, one of the pioneers in peaceful parenting, says, "If you want your kids to feel safe, if you want them to feel they can take risks and ask questions and make mistakes and learn to trust and share their feelings and grow. Then we have to create a safe environment where they can learn from their mistakes." You with me? We have to create a safe environment where they can learn from their mistakes. I love that. I want that for each and every one of you. I really want that for each and every one of your kids.

Okay. That's a lot to share today. I'm going to invite you to marinate on that for a week. Next week we're going to cover part two of setting limits where I'm going to take you through specific age based examples of setting limits. Sound good? Okay. Until then, 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.

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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.