

Ep #32: Setting Limits: Stop Punishing and Start Guiding Part 2



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With Your Host
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. Today I'm bringing you part two of stop punishing and start guiding. Did you love last week's episode? I got amazing feedback from you all about the episode. As you know in part one, we laid the groundwork. We talked about guiding our kids into learning rather than punishing into obedience. I love this topic. I love it. We talked about how children need support and safety to grow. They need room to make mistakes. Sometimes over and over again. They need to be coached into learning the lesson not scared or punished into obedience.

Today I want to give you specific examples of what that might look like. I could give you tons and tons and tons of examples of how to set limits rather than punish, but I want you to hear this. It's not that I'm going to tell you the exact way to set the limits for your family. Rather setting limits is a philosophy and an approach. It's a way of thinking about your kid's mistakes, and it's a way of guiding and teaching the lesson rather than scaring into obedience. It's an approach and a commitment.

Let me say of course our kids need rules and limits. This is never about becoming a permissive parent because rules and limits help your kids feel love and know what's expected of them. It allows them to be successful. What I want you to hear is the need to acknowledge your kid's perspective. When kids feel seen, heard, and valued, they're more able and more likely to accept the limits that we're setting.

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Setting limits is the process of supporting and teaching your kids while being clear of the request and letting your child know the limits. Let me say that again. It's the process of supporting and teaching your kid while being clear with the request and letting your kid know the limits. If possible, I want you to think about tools like giving a choice or redirecting. It's about what the child can do to meet their needs and solve the problem.

Limits are based on a basic understanding of developmentally appropriate expectations of your child, their temperament, and your family values. Said another way, when we set a limit, we want to take into account appropriate expectations of their age, their temperament, and your family values.

When my clients set limits, I encourage them to think about tools like giving choices. That might look like, "Hey, there's no throwing the ball in the house. You can take the ball outside or you can throw a stuffed animal in the house." Right? Choices. The choice might be you can brush your teeth now or you can brush your teeth in five minutes. Giving your child a choice while knowing that tonight is a night that we need to brush the teeth and we need to get it done, but I can give you a choice as to when you do it.

As your kids get older, you can move into the "if then" choices as I call them. If you choose to do this then this will happen. Or if you choose to do this then this won't happen, right? Choose is the important word there. You say to your child, "if you choose to do this," you're putting the choice in their hands. You're letting them know upfront, and you've set the limit.

So examples might be you can't have your phone in your room while you're sleeping. You can charge your phone in the kitchen or in my bedroom. You get to choose. Another example might be let's say you've talked about an app like maybe Snapchat or Instagram. You've told your child that you don't think that they're ready to have the app. You're not ready for them to

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have it yet. Maybe you're not ready for them to have a subscription on TikTok, let's say.

So then you set a limit by telling them, "Hey if you choose to download that app that we talked about not using then you will have to take a break from your phone for a week." All the choices are in their hands. If they choose to download that app, if they choose to disregard what you said, if they choose to download that app then they will have to take a break from their phone for a week. You're letting them know upfront and they get to choose.

Another example might be, "If you choose to come home after curfew then you won't be able to go out next weekend." Right? You're setting limits by giving them a choice. You're also setting the limit upfront when you're calm and regulated. You're communicating it to them at a time when they're calm and regulated.

Another tool you might use with setting limits is to redirect. This works especially well when you have little kids, right? You might say, "Hey, remember we don't bite in this family. I understand that you're very, very, very mad at your brother, but use your words instead of biting." You're redirecting them away from the action. Another example might be, "It looks like you wanted your sister to move so you pushed her. No pushing. That hurts. Instead use your words and tell her to move please." That's redirecting.

Another example might be, "I can see that you're full of energy right now. Let's go outside and play." Right? You're just redirecting your little one. By setting limits, you're redirecting them to do something else that works for them and works for you at the same time.

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The third mistake I really like to work with is repairing after a big mistake. Repair and recovery. Let's say something's happened and you might ask your child afterwards, "Hey, how can we make this right? How can we make restitution for the mistake?" You take time to sit down, think about it, and discuss it together.

Let's say one of your kids has hit the other kid or broke one of their toys. You might sit down together and say, "Hey the toy is broken, and we can't fix it, but we can make it right. What can we do?" Maybe your little one decides to either sincerely go apologize or draw a picture or write a note saying how sorry they are that they did that, right? That's a great way to make a repair.

Let's say your child has gotten in trouble at school. Maybe you have a 10 year old that's gotten in trouble at school. You decide to sit down and repair after a big mistake. You have a conversation about it. You say, "Hey, how can we fix this?" The two of you decide that your child is going to go into the classroom and apologize to the teacher. Or maybe write a note to the other child that he or she hurt. Maybe write a note to the teacher letting them know they understand their mistake and they're not going to do it again.

You can focus on repair and restitution of the mistake. Oftentimes this makes a very strong impression on your child and helps them feel like they've asked for forgiveness and brought the situation full circle. Then they can move on from there and move forward. So the tools of choices, redirect, and repair are used with the intention of finding win/win solutions for both parties involved. Setting limits gives a voice to your child and his feelings and needs.

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As we talked about last week, I want you to remember setting limits is upfront. It's not waiting until the mistake has happened. It's setting the limits upfront. The limits are based on your values. You're often giving your child choices. It's the beginning of the conversation, not the end.

Oftentimes in my family when we've set a limit with our son, after a while he'll come back and want to have a conversation about it. "Hey, that's not working for me. I'd like to try this instead. What do you think about this? Could we change it to that?" It's really taught all of us how to have conversations around setting limits. It also helps us once we agree to the limit because everybody's had a say, it's much easier to follow the limit and understand the consequences of not following the limit.

The benefit of setting limits is that you're setting them when you're in your higher brain, when you're regulated, and you're communicating it to your child when he or she or they are regulated. Another advantage is it turns on the internal compass, which is ultimately what we're going for here. Ultimately, we want our kids to do the right thing because it's the right thing to do not because they fear getting caught. Setting limits allows the strong willed child to feel in control.

Lastly let me say setting limits also releases you from the expectation that we don't always have to have the right answer when things go wrong. It allows you to circle back around to the conversation even if you set a limit that you realize is sort of too strenuous or isn't reasonable or you went too far. You can always circle back around to the conversation and set the limit because it's the beginning of the conversation, not the end.

Setting the limit from a calm place, from a regulated state, has honestly been the biggest game changer for me in my parenting bar none. It has been the tool that has allowed me to make the most progress down the

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path of peaceful parenting. Setting the limit from a place of calm while I'm regulated. It is my most useful productive helpful tool that I've ever brought into my parenting, ever. I want this for you too.

So let me illustrate this for you with an example from a family that I work with who recently set a limit on a really important day. What happened is the mom started out punishing the child but caught herself, regrouped, and instead of punishing set a limit. I think you may be able to really relate to this example. So I want to share it with you. This is an email exchange that a client and I had recently.

My client Sue wrote to me and said, "Lisa, my eight year old son is strong willed, has ADHD, and is an only child. There's a weird dynamic we see when we go on vacation with my large extended family." She wrote, "He becomes obstinate and disrespectful to my husband and I." She explained to me that that evening he was going to be in her sister's wedding. The night before at the wedding rehearsal, he was talking while adults were talking, interrupting, laughing, yelling, hitting the teenager next to him who happened to be his cousin, and not doing what he was told.

Sue said, "I marched up to him to pull him aside and give him a talking to, and he shouted no, pulled his arm away, and ran away from me." Sue said, "My son will not listen to me when he's around his cousins. I feel it's because he's hanging around with everyone in the beach house playing miniature golf and feeling very free."

She asked me, "Lisa how do I get him to behave?" Sue said, "My husband and I are at each other's throats when our son behaves this way, and I feel like a failure as a parent. Please give me some encouragement and guidance Lisa. Please."

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So I wrote back to her, and I said, “Sue, why do you feel like a failure as a parent? It sounds like your son is exploring and getting a bit carried away with his cousins. Can you work past the failure and just see this as a growing experience for all of you? Feeling like a failure is you getting into the storm with him, you getting triggered rather than staying on the sidelines and being his emotional coach.

“It sounds like he doesn’t know how to handle these situations and trying to punish him into behaving isn’t getting you anywhere. Can you talk with him ahead of time about age appropriate behavior? Can you explain that this is a special day for your sister and family? Let him know that you want him to have fun and be respectful at the same time.”

Now, here's where I encouraged her to set the limit. “Then let him know that if he chooses to hit or do X then Y will happen. Let him know upfront so he can choose which path he wants to take. So it might be something like if you choose to hit and get really rough with people on this special day then we’ll take a walk away from the group until you can gain control of yourself. Then we’ll rejoin the group. This is not a punishment. This is just setting a limit.”

I encouraged Sue to let him know upfront what will happen. Invite him to regulate himself. Be specific so he knows what to work on. Then if he can't regulate himself you step in and help him. As the parent it works best if you stay calm and empathetic. Empathy might look like understanding that he loves being around his cousins and he finds it really hard to regulate himself when he’s around them.

Sue wrote back and said, “Thank you. I hope he will walk away with me if need be. I'm nervous about it.” So I wrote back to her and said, “If you tell him the plan ahead of time, he should. Review it over and over and over

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again in the car now. Also understand and have empathy that he might be nervous, scared, excited, anxious, or all of the above about being the center of attention in the wedding and eight years old. Imagine how agitating all of this could feel if you don't know how to process it. Then it comes out in unacceptable ways, especially for an eight year old boy."

Sue responded, "My husband and I just went over it with him in the car. He said many, many, many times Lisa that he was very nervous. I can see that now and have empathy for him." She said, "I was so busy being mad at him for not behaving that I couldn't see what was going on for him." I wrote, "Acknowledge that and give him lots of empathy. Tell him that you understand what he's going through, and it will be okay. Tell him it's okay to be nervous. Ask him how you can help him. Let him know if it feels like too much, he can come over and stand by you and hold onto your leg."

Sue wrote, "My husband agreed wholeheartedly with what you said. Thank you. This is stabilizing us." Then I wrote back to her, and I said, "My last tip is to release the expectation that this must go perfectly. Your son doesn't have to perform or get it right." I said, "This will change your energy and help him relax on a subconscious level."

She had sent me a picture. So I said you guys look great. Enjoy yourselves. Sue finalized the email exchange by saying, "Wonderful, wonderful advice and encouragement. We're talking now about his nervousness. You're right. I need to let go of my expectations."

So the next day Sue followed up with a quick message to me. She said, "Lisa with your help my son sailed through participating in the wedding with no issues. I was able to focus on my sister and not worry about what he was doing. I just kept telling myself he's perfect as he is and let him be." Then she said, "LOL, I'm using your advice to work on being less reactive

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with my husband as well. Lisa you're a godsend at the time, and we so appreciate you."

Aw thanks so. So this is a cool example, yes? I love this example. I love how Sue got triggered. She got angry that her son wasn't believing. Now, let's remember. He's eight years old, and he's in a wedding for the first time. He's away on vacation out of his routine, and he's around his cousins. Then he's in a wedding. So he's nervous and probably feels all the expectations. He gets nervous that he's going to remember what he's supposed to do.

So then he started to storm, right, by hitting his cousin, laughing too much, and talking over people. When she tried to punish him into being obedient, he stormed even more. Then when she started talking to him about his feelings and needs, he was able to regulate himself. "Yes mom. I'm nervous. I'm nervous."

Then she was able to set a limit. Not from one of those places of, "If you don't behave, I'm going to come over there right now and grab you." Right? Because how is that going to elicit cooperation? So instead she said, "Hey, this is a special day. If this feels like they're getting to be a little too much, I'm going to come over. You are just going to take a quick little walk to gain control over ourselves. Then as soon as we've got control, we'll rejoin the party."

It's not like hey, if you can't behave, we're going back to our hotel room or we're going to leave the wedding. Right? Because that's not going to regulate this little boy. That's just going to amp it up even more. She's just calmly setting the limit by letting him know upfront, "Hey, if things get a little out of hand or I see you hitting your cousins or struggling, we're just going to take a little walk until you gain control over yourself. No big deal. As soon

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as you gain control of yourself, we'll just rejoin the party. I want you to have fun and be respectful because we're at a wedding with a whole bunch of adults."

So she could say to him, "If you choose to hit and get really rough with people then we'll take a walk away from the group. As soon as you gain control of yourself, we'll rejoin the group. That is setting a limit from a place of empathy and understanding. That is helping everybody get their needs met. I need you to be respectful and not be wild. If it gets that way for you, then the action plan is if then then we're just going to walk away. As soon as we gain control, we'll rejoin the group. Because I can understand honey that you're very, very, very nervous." Right?

Then it's releasing the expectation that he get it right or be perfect. Because if he doesn't, you have a game plan." Setting limits is so useful. I hope you found this example really helpful.

Okay let's recap. Setting limits are not demands, as you saw in that example. They're not demands coming from an expectation of complete obedience. Rather a process of teaching and supporting. Setting limits gives a voice to your child and his or her feelings and needs. Setting limits are upfront, values based, you give choices. It's the beginning of a conversation, not the end.

In the example of Sue, but practicing it and talking about it ahead of time, he was able to really draw out and understand how nervous her eight year old son really was. Then support him with understanding and empathy with that, which is why it's important to understand that setting limits are the beginning of the conversation. It's the beginning of everybody working to understand their feelings and needs, and setting the limit so that behaviors that come from our values can be followed. Right?

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When your child does something wrong, makes a mistake, or storms, what is the goal? Well, number one it's to help them not do it again. Right? If they spilled milk or missed curfew or downloaded that app or got up in the middle of the night to get on their iPad or hit their brother or broke their sister's toy. Threw a ball in the house. The goal is to number one, help them not do it again. Number two it's to teach them right from wrong while guiding them around your values.

Here's the truth. We can't make another human being do what we want them to do. We can only help them want to. Loving guidance and empathetic limits help your child want to follow your guidance. So good habits become a part of who he or she or they are whether you're there or not. Rather than scaring or punishing into obedience and teaching them to avoid getting caught.

If we look back to the example I shared with you about Sue and her eight year old son, punishing versus setting limits, right? The punishing was going over and grabbing him by the arm and yanking him away to have a good talking with him. Right? That was scaring or punishing him into obedience. So then the game might become hitting the cousin when the parent isn't looking or when the parent is in the other room. Which, let's be honest, might annoy the cousin over time and create more conflict in the family.

More importantly, it's scaring or punishing the eight year old into obedience. Then often times it becomes a game of not getting caught. When she set the limit and took the time to understand that he was nervous and took the time to understand that he was storming from a place of nervousness and really understood that and really worked with him. Then set the limit of, "Hey, it's not a problem. If you get a little rough and things feel like they're getting out of hand, we're just going to take a little walk until

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you regulate yourself and come back. That helps the child want to follow the guidance.

So good right? Ah. I just love it. I love it. I love it. I want it for you. I want it for you, and I want it for your kids. It's important. It creates connection that leads to cooperation. I'm going to share this quote again because I think Alfie Cohen says it so well. "If your kids feel safe, they can take risks, ask questions, make mistakes, learn to trust, share their feelings, and grow." Thank you, Alfie, for that inside. I want this. I want this for you, and I want this for your kids.

I want to just say you can do this. You've got this. It takes commitment and practice. It takes understanding progress not perfection. Then it just takes setting your intention not to dig in. Ah, all right. I hope you've found this super helpful. I would love to hear some feedback on how it's going for you. So jump over to our Instagram page @the_peaceful_parent and share your success stories with me. Send me a DM. I'm dying to hear from 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.

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