

Ep #89: Help, My Kid is Angry!



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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. Welcome to today's episode. Today, I want to talk about one of the most critical tasks of childhood that we can teach our kids. One of the most critical tasks of childhood is to learn to tolerate the wounds of everyday life. And it is one of our greatest responsibilities as parents to help our kids learn how to do this. And for many of us, we may have a really hard time believing we're capable of teaching our children this lesson because we never really learned it ourselves.

I'm excited for this episode because I'm pretty sure it will not only help you build connection with your children, but it may even help you on a personal level to build some tolerance for the wounds of our own lives. The everyday wounds, like disappointment, like fear, like frustration, being let down, things not working, out not getting what you want, not being on time.

Things like that are examples of everyday wounds. And part of emotional intelligence is being able to tolerate these everyday wounds that come along for all of us in life. And as we've talked about before, the most effective way to teach our kids, as always, is to model. So when you learn and practice these tools yourself, it will become much easier for your children to learn these tools as well. Make sense? Awesome.

The biggest point I want to make today is that so often, in children and adults, intolerance of disappointment, frustration, hurt feelings, the intolerance of these things, these feelings, is masked by reactive anger. When you, your children, or any human feels anger, there's always an underlying feeling that's masking it.

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Anger is a cover emotion for deeper feelings. And in today's episode I want to give you some examples of what reactive anger looks like in children and name some of the emotions underneath that reactive anger. I also want to give you tools that will help your children learn to tolerate life's everyday disappointments, feel their big negative feelings and manage their feelings in ways that are not only appropriate, but build connection. Sound good? All right. Let's dig in.

The first example I want to share with you comes from a mom in my hive community, in my monthly membership of like-minded parents where I dig deep into helping you be the parent you've always wanted to be. So this mom in the hive recently asked me a question in one of our weekly coaching calls.

She asked, "Lisa, how do I help my seven year old son through the disappointment that the other kids don't want to do what he wants to do at school? And then the anger and the self-hate talk ensue from it?" It's such a great question.

Maybe you're like, "Hey, yeah, I have that question to, Lisa." Now this mom already recognized on all three levels that were linked together in this situation. Disappointment happens and then there's reactive anger, and then there's self-deprecation ring any bells? Right?

There are three steps to take when you find yourself or your child in any situation that would typically result in an outburst of anger or angry behavior or reactive anger. So I'm going to give you the three steps.

Step one is to normalize that it's one of life's disappointments. This is how we coach, and support, and model for our children, we normalize life's disappointments. Tell your child that there is nothing wrong with him or her feeling this way.

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Your feelings are normal, everyone feels disappointment, rejection, frustration hurt feelings. I feel this way sometimes, I can understand how you feel this way. It's normal to feel this way. I cannot tell you how important it is to normalize our kids' feelings, especially with regard to life's disappointments.

Step two, name the feelings. This is where you want to help over the years to build your child's vocabulary of feelings. I'm often in any and all of my coaching and courses, I share the feelings wheel. The feelings wheel gives you over 75 different names for emotions.

The more you practice naming your feelings with your children, the more capable they will be of feeling, articulating, and managing their emotions without feeling a need to mask them with anger. Or when the anger comes up, they'll understand it's a beacon for deeper feelings and they'll feel comfortable digging in and articulating, I'm feeling frustrated, disappointed, letdown, left out, rejected, unsure.

They will really be able, over time, to name the feeling. It's such a critical, important step and this is one that really begins with us modeling naming our own feelings. Digging below the anger when we're upset with them, when something's gone wrong, when something's not working at work or at home.

If we get stuck in reactive anger, and we're always coming from a place of reactive anger, and we're not building our own vocabulary, and we're not going underneath to practice naming the feeling, they won't be able to do it either. This is one of those things that you can't tell, you have to model for your children.

Step three, help your children to practice simply sitting with their uncomfortable feelings. This is where, in all likelihood, all of us need some practice.

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Many of us have been conditioned to believe that feelings like frustration, disappointment, jealousy, envy, hurt, rejection, left out, not sure what to do, disappointed, not sure where to go, are bad. And that we should reject them and push them down and never reveal them to anyone.

Hence, all the anger we see in our society today. All the reactive anger people get stuck in. There is no bad feeling. No feeling is bad. All feelings are useful and are signals and guidance for us. And all the feelings need an appropriate outlet.

Going back to the initial question the mom presented for coaching, this is what I told her, at seven years old disappointment can feel intolerable. And what kids do then is they get stuck in reactive anger because reactive anger gets a response. Parent comes to rescue the child from reactive anger. But what we know is that anger is always a cover emotion for all ages for something deeper.

Let me say that again, anger is always a cover emotion for something deeper. And so what you want to do is you want to teach, and guide, and model your child on how to go beneath that reactive anger to the real feelings, sadness, frustration, disappointment, feeling left out, jealous, hurt resentful.

If you're not mindful of the underlying emotion, what happens is that our kids get stuck in reactive anger and they grew up to be reactive angry adults. We all know one, right? So when no one wanted to play with this boy at recess, it felt to him like the world was going to end. What we want to do is normalize that for him. Normalize that it felt like the world was going to end and teach him there are feelings underneath the anger.

Think about this, happiness as small children somewhat depends on them getting what they want in life. They're not familiar with people not going along with their plans. When children are small, grownups, particularly

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parents and older siblings, are quick to respond to the child's needs and wants. We learn as parents of young children that this typically the path of least resistance, less storming, more cooperation, and it feels good to be the provider of everything our little ones need.

When that stage wears off and we, as parents, expect our children to do more and more for themselves, and to figure things out on their own, to be autonomous and independent, to work towards it, this can feel devastating to kids when they first experience this. Because suddenly not everybody's doing for them and they're not getting everything they want. And they, around that time, get introduced to feelings like disappointment, rejection, fear of missing out.

And they have no idea how to name, and process, and deal with these feelings because they haven't experienced them yet. They have absolutely no idea that they can survive these big feelings that feel bad, and that they can go to the other side and feel happy again. That being disappointed, frustrated, mad, sad, et cetera, is temporary.

They have no idea yet. And kids will do anything not to feel these intolerable feelings so they go to quote, bad behavior, reactive anger, and they act out. They cry, they rage, they hit their siblings, they pick fights, they project their uncomfortable intolerable feelings onto someone else and we respond to it.

And if we're not careful, what we do is we're only responding to the reactive anger and so that becomes a tool. What we want to do instead is we want to teach our kids to weather the current disappointment. Assure them that they can't always get what they want, but that we're always there for them, always.

And we do this by saying things like, I don't want you to hit your siblings. You can't hit people when you're angry, but we can talk about this and I can

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help you. It sounds like you were really frustrated today at recess when no one would do what you wanted to do. Or oh, sweetheart, that hurts so bad, doesn't it? I so get that and that's so normal to feel that way.

Do you know that everybody feels frustration and disappointment? I feel it when I ask big brother to get his shoes on and he doesn't do it. I feel disappointed when I want pizza and instead we end up having grilled chicken. I feel frustration when I ask people at work to turn in their work on time and they miss the deadline.

It's so helpful to give examples of grownups and other family members in the family, who recently showed their feelings of frustration and disappointment. Remember this morning, son, when I asked you to turn off the TV and get your shoes on and you didn't do it right away? I got frustrated. Remember, when your sister wanted to go to her friend's house last night after dinner but dad said she couldn't go? She was disappointed.

Normalizing feelings like disappointment, frustration and hurt makes us and our children feel like we can relax into the feeling or circumstance and we don't have to take it personally. It's when we take things personally that we feel defensive and we react to the anger.

In situations when your children do react to their underlying feelings with anger by doing things like hitting their siblings, or throwing something across the room, or screaming really loud I want to encourage you to use empathy rather than punishment. And say things like I can see that you're really angry. I wonder if you're also really sad because you want to play with that toy and it's not available. I can see you're really angry, I wonder if you're disappointed because you really want a cookie right now and I'm saying no.

Focus on taking them underneath the reactive anger into the feelings beneath that with empathy rather than punishment. If they did hit someone,

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or break something out of anger, or storm in an unacceptable way, they do need to do something to correct the mistake. But this should be addressed after first doing the three steps, normalize the big feeling. The disappointment, the frustration, normalize it. Name the feeling and give time and space for them to sit with their uncomfortable feelings.

Reconciling, retribution, and after action reviews should come secondary or after. We want to teach our kids not to go to anger when they're disappointed because it's okay to have these big feelings. Even if they feel bad or negative, or feel like the world is going to end. If you're helping them go underneath their anger to their real feelings, the behavior should take care of itself.

Here's another example from the same mom who asked for coaching. In another situation her son dumped half a canister of Parmesan cheese on his spaghetti at dinner one night and he started to rage and call himself stupid. I mean, who hasn't spilled a massive amount of Parmesan cheese on some food at some time in their life?

This mom asked me if this was the same thing as no one wanting to play with him. Yes, and here's where they learn that there are different emotions that can cause the same feeling of anger. You can ask him, are you embarrassed? Are you disappointed? Are you frustrated that you ruined your dinner? I can see that you're really angry, are you also frustrated that this is causing you not to be able to eat dinner and dinner is ruined?

There's still a feeling underneath the anger so we want to normalize that. In this situation all this seven year old was doing was turning the anger onto himself. And so I coached his mom to respond with, it's okay. I can see you're upset about this. Are you also frustrated? Oh my goodness, I feel frustrated too when I spill Parmesan or feel like I've ruined my dinner.

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Spilling Parmesan annoys everybody, sweetheart, because it's hard to clean up. I've done it a bunch of times and I felt all those feelings of embarrassment, frustration, disappointment. Don't focus on the behavior or the reaction, help your kids dig underneath the anger.

If you do this over time consistently, the reaction will take care of itself, the behavior will go away. And don't take it personally and think things like does he think we're going to beat him because he spilled his Parmesan? My goodness, there's a lot going on at seven. There's a lot of pressure at school to get things right and not make mistakes. And sit still and pay attention, and behave, and do good work.

And some of what he's probably showing you at home is unpacking his emotional backpack from the day at school. The incident with the Parmesan cheese and him getting really frustrated and calling himself stupid probably has nothing to do with the Parmesan cheese or dinner.

He just needs to understand he's frustrated and disappointed and maybe hungry. And maybe upset that he has to stop eating and tend to this or that his food is ruined. So again, if we go underneath the reactive anger to the feelings, the behavior will take care of itself.

For another parent, her eight year old didn't get all the marshmallows he wanted so he started poking at his sister because he was mad. And this particular mom reports that her eight year old son does it every time he doesn't get what he wants. He starts threatening or complaining or trying to poke at and annoy his siblings.

So we talked about this and I encouraged her to go a layer deeper. He's getting stuck in reactive anger. What he needs help with is naming frustration and disappointment that he didn't get the marshmallows he wanted. Help him access all those deeper emotions and sit with him as he learns to tolerate frustration and disappointment.

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Please hear this, please, this is not the time to judge your child for wanting more than he has. This is not the time to try to teach him gratitude and appreciation for things he does have. Well, but you got 10 marshmallows, you should be happy with them. This is not the time.

It is the time to help him normalize his feelings, to name his feelings and help him sit in the discomfort of disappointment and frustration by giving him the time and space to sort through that. Please do not say to your kids, I get it but... I like to say no butting. I get it, but at least you got some. I get it, but last week you had more. I get it, but you need to just get over it.

Instead say, I can see you're really mad. Are you also frustrated that you don't have all the marshmallows you want? And then just pause. That's empathy and validation. I can see, sweetheart, that you are really mad. I imagine maybe you're also frustrated. Or are you disappointed that you didn't get more marshmallows? And then you wait and you let him process and have space.

That, real world peaceful parents, is empathy and validation. Not I get it, but... Remember, no butting. I encouraged this mom to recognize that she was frustrated that her son hit his sister, but he's frustrated that he can't have more marshmallows. Remember the power of modeling. If you're frustrated every time your kid gets frustrated, or if you're stuck in reactive anger every time they have a big emotion, that's what you're modeling for them, reactive anger. Mind blown.

You specifically will react to their reactive anger with your own reactive anger. And so it just reinforces that reactive anger is the way to go and I don't want that, for them or for you or for your relationship. So remember the three steps, normalize the feelings, name them, and then give space to sit with the big uncomfortable feelings.

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Middle children feel a lot of frustration because they can't do what the older ones do and they don't want to be associated with the younger ones. So they're often looking for autonomy and their own unique role within the family.

So instead of telling a middle child what you know, I know you're angry because you want more marshmallows. You might ask him how he feels. What's it like for you when I tell you you can't have more marshmallows? Tell me about it. Tell me how it feels when your big sister gets X and you don't get it yet. It doesn't mean you have to give it to him, but you can just be there to help them go underneath the reactive anger. That is empathy.

Now, I know for many of us it doesn't feel natural to ask people how they feel. It's uncomfortable, especially with our children. Most of us were never asked as children. Or maybe even now as adults no one's asking us how we feel about things. It was never modeled for us. But you can do this. This is the work to do. This is where you, yes you, change the trajectory of your family.

This is how you build connection and turn it into cooperation. You teach your kids to go underneath reactive anger. Remember, anger is always masking an underlying feeling, and typically that underlying feeling is uncomfortable and in many, many, many cases feels absolutely intolerable.

And our job as real world peaceful parents is to help our children build their tolerance by normalizing uncomfortable feelings, naming those feelings, helping them identify them, and then giving them space to simply sit with and feel their discomfort for a period of time. Amazing, right? So important, I can't tell you.

And I know you've got this. I want this for you and your kids. And remember, I said at the beginning of this I'm excited to bring you today's episode because I'm pretty sure that not only will it help you build

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connection with your kids, but for some of you, this may help you on a personal level in all of your other relationships.

It may help you build a tolerance for the wounds in your own life. And it may open your eyes to how you often get stuck in reactive anger and what to do about it. How to evolve past being a reactive, angry person. I want this for you, each and every one of you. Oh, so good. All right, 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 mini course. You will find everything you need to get started on the path to peaceful parenting just waiting for you over there at www.thepeacefulparent.com/welcome. 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.