

Ep #118: The Problem with Why!



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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. I am so excited to be with you, and I am thrilled to bring you this week's topic. So let me start out today by asking you, do you ever ask your child why? Why did you do that? Why are you doing that? Why did that happen? Yeah? Well, let me share with you that asking your child why did you do that is not helpful. It often creates shame, and your child often doesn't know why they did something anyway because remember they have an incredibly underdeveloped brain.

Now, as parents, our brain wants to think, and we all do this by the way, that the things your kid does is the problem. That that thing your kid is doing is triggering you to be dysregulated, reactive, and ultimately disconnect from them. Bear with me here while I go a little deeper and explain this. Because right now you might be going, what Lisa? You are crazy. When my kid does something, what they actually do dysregulates me. But bear with me a minute while I explain and open your mind to a whole new way of thinking.

Whatever it is your kid does, whether it's he hides his food in his room, she constantly pulls her pants up too high and then ends up picking out the wedgie all the time, he's constantly hitting his little brother. She loses things all the time with no regard or remorse. He sneaks out, she breaks curfew. He refuses to write things down to help him remember what he needs to remember. Whatever it is, I'm here to tell you that that is not the actual thing that's causing you dysregulation, or said another way that is not the problem. That is not causing the trigger.

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You see, my parent, my real world peaceful parent, the trigger is coming from a thought you have about what they are doing. You're having a feeling. As I've said before and as we know, feelings don't come from circumstances or other people's actions. They come from our own thoughts about the person's actions. Let me say that again.

The trigger is coming from a thought you have about what your kids are doing. The losing things, the pulling their pants up, the sneaking out of their room, the refusing to write things down. This is happening because you're having a feeling. What we know is that feelings don't come from your kids' actions. They come from your thoughts about your kid's actions. Transformation in your parenting comes when you uncover the thought that you have every time the action happens.

We often develop a go to thought when our kid does X, loses something, hits their brother, pulls their pants up so high they have a wedgie, hides food in his room, hits his little brother, loses things, refuses to write things down. When we uncover our “go to thought” every time the action happens, we can transform as a parent. Remember, 2023 is the year of small actions equaling big results and transforming our parenting. That's what we're talking about today. Small actions that can have a big impact on you, your parenting, and your connection with your kids.

Here's what I want you to hear. If you can figure out what that thought is, that reoccurring thought, every time that action happens, then you can have some relief around it, and there won't be a power struggle over it. Ironically, the behavior will likely stop on its own. I've seen this over and over and over and over. I've been a parent coach for well over 15 years. At this point, I've worked with hundreds of thousands of parents around the world.

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What I know with 100% certainty is that if you yes, you, right now, can figure out that reoccurring thought that you have every time your kid does X, hits, loses something, yells. Every single time you can figure out the reoccurring thought, then what I know for sure is that you can have some relief around it. When you get a little relief, when you show up in a neutral way, you won't automatically power struggle with your kids. Ironically, the behavior will take care of itself.

So let's go a little deeper. When your kid does the thing that triggers a thought for you, what do you feel in that moment? Think about this. Kid does X. I have thought Y, I feel Z. Kid pulls their pants up really high, spends the next 20 minutes pulling their wedgie out. I have a thought they shouldn't be doing this. This is wrong. I feel anger, embarrassment, frustration.

Step one is to define the feeling. Give it a word. Picture yourself in the moment your child does the thing, and define your dominant, major, predominant feeling in that moment. If one of your answers or your feeling is frustration because you don't know why he or she is doing the thing, there you have it. The thought is why? Why is my kid doing this? The feeling is frustration.

So my kid gets in the car to report that he once again has lost his gym clothes. My thought is why is he doing this? We've been over this. We've talked about this. Why is he losing his gym clothes often? Why? Why? My guess is if you're asking the why question, the predominant feeling is going to be frustration.

In that example, you have uncovered your triggering thought. Why? Why are you continuing to do this? We've talked about this. I've coached you about it. I've given you tools and suggestions. We've agreed upon an action plan. I've supported you. I've explained why this could be problem for you

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now and in other ways and down the road. So why, why, why won't you just stop doing this?

Real world peaceful parent, the problem in this question is why? W-H-Y. Why? Why, you ask me? Well, good question. Why should I not ask the question why, Lisa? Because there's no answer to it. Here's the rub. Anytime we can't answer a question, we get triggered by it. This is part of the human experience. When we ask why is she doing that and we can't answer it because we don't know their motive, we don't know what they're thinking, we get triggered. The real answer is why is she doing that? Well, because she is. That's why.

When our brain can't answer a question, it often leads to a feeling of frustration. Frustration is a gap between expectation and reality. The bigger the gap, the bigger the frustration. Let me say that again because it's too good for you to miss it. Frustration is the gap between expectation and reality. The bigger the gap between expectation and reality, the bigger the frustration.

So your brain asks a question that there is no answer to, and it either wants an answer or it wants him to stop doing the thing. Stop behaving that way. When you don't get an answer and you don't get him or her to stop, the frustration mounts. Then you get triggered, and then you storm alongside your kid. I know. I'm not in your house. I'm not watching what you do. But I know this story like the back of my hand. I've been there. I've coached on it. I know how it goes down. I'm here to help you.

What I want you to realize is that the behavior won't get fixed by demanding that your kid simply stops doing what he or she does. You've already tried that. It doesn't work, or we wouldn't need this episode. Here's the fix. The fix is to answer the question. So answer the question. Why does she do this? Why?

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Let's say you come up with a hypothesis that the reason your daughter pulls the pants up too high and is constantly picking the wedgie out is some sort of coping mechanism she uses to ease her anxiety in new situations or her overstimulation in new situations. Let's say you find an all knowing doctor who confirms your hypothesis without any doubt. How would that make you feel? What would your new thought be?

It would likely make you feel a bit relieved. Right? Can you feel that? Like relieved because I got an answer. Now I know. I thought it was X, and the doctor confirmed. Why does she do it? Because she gets anxious in new situations.

Now, here's the thing. Thoughts are just thoughts. They're random. They are not true or untrue. Every day, every hour, every minute, our thoughts come and go. We have a lot of thoughts about why our kids are doing what they do. They're just thoughts. They're random. They are not true or untrue, and they come and go.

So here is the secret, the tool. There is nothing keeping you from borrowing a new thought or a different thought. So in the example above, you could think this is just temporary, and it will go away. When my daughter no longer feels anxious, she won't pull her pants up extra high until it bothers her, and then she has to spend 20 minutes pulling him down. At some point, my kid isn't going to lose his water bottle every day at school. This will go away. At some point, my kids will learn how to get along. There's no need to be upset about it.

If she is anxious, why would I want to focus on it and make her more anxious about having or doing the thing that already advertises that she's anxious to everyone around her? Why do I want to draw attention to this? Why do I want to increase her anxiety?

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These are some of the thoughts you could think that are better than what you're thinking now, including asking yourself why as if you're searching for an answer. Make up the answer. Don't ask why. Come up with the answer instead. Make sure it's a new thought that serves you, serves her and serves a relationship.

There are any number, an entire plethora of thoughts you can choose from in the moment when your brain asks why. I would even suggest writing them down or keeping them in the notes section of your phone to refer to them every time the thing happens. So when you ask why, you have an answer.

When you start to hear yourself questioning why? Why is she doing that? Pull out your list and read them. Answer the question. Because when there's no answer, that is what is triggering you. Why Lisa? Why? Why does she do this? I hear this from parents all the time. They ask this like it's some great big mystery that has to be solved before they can calm down.

If you're going to ask the why question, answer it. Make sure you're picking a thought that serves you, serves her, and serves the relationship. So you might ask, why is she doing this? Because she wants to could be the answer, because it's a habit could be the answer, because it's temporary, and she'll grow out of it. I know this. Because he isn't ready yet. Because he hasn't understood how to stop losing things yet. Give yourself an entire catalog of answers to your questions of why. Because different circumstances may require different answers to satisfy your brain at different times.

But here's the most important thing you have to hear about this episode. It is a fact, it has been discovered in neuroscience that unanswered questions trigger us as humans. The biggest one is why? We ask it, and then we feign searching for this wise answer out in the world. Why does he

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do that? Why do they do that? Why can't they stop? If we don't have an answer, it drives us crazy, and we get frustrated, and then we get triggered. Can you see this?

So what I want you to do is intentionally come up with an answer that serves you, that serves your kid, that serves the relationship instead of waiting until you're triggered and coming up with an answer like he's lazy, she's disrespectful, he's uncooperative, he hates his brother, he refuses to get along. He refuses to listen to me. Those answers to the question why, my friend, do not serve you, the relationship, your parenting, or your kid.

Let me give you another example. If you were to go to the doctor, you have some symptoms that you can't quite get your finger on. They've been going on for a while. You don't know what they are. You go to the doctor, and she tells you that you have a condition. You have a condition, but I don't know what caused it, and I don't know how to treat it. In a few weeks, we'll run some tests.

My guess is you leave that doctor's appointment feeling anxious and frustrated. The great unknown. Your brain bounces all over the place. You try to piece all the puzzles of your symptoms together. You try to figure out. You try to rethink every word the doctor said. You ask people. You're in search of an answer. You cannot figure it out.

The fact that she doesn't know and you don't know leaves you feeling anxious and frustrated because there's not an answer to the why. Maybe you even start to fill in the gaps. Or you come up with the answers on your own. Like you get on Google and you try to go to medical school on Google, and all of a sudden what you come up with is catastrophic and incredibly triggering to you.

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Now, imagine this. You have some symptoms, and you go to the doctor and she tells you she has answers. She has an exact diagnosis for you. You have X, and we treat it with Y. Here's your prognosis. Even if the answers are not what you want to hear, your anxiety around the why question is greatly diminished. Answers to why feel relieving. I don't know or silence or no answer when your brain asks why and you can't come up with an answer is much harder to take than an answer to the question.

As I've said before, a confused mind does nothing. So every time you ask a question as a parent and there's no answer, it gets very triggering. I love the quote you don't have to decide what to think, but your brain needs supervising. You need to supervise your brain. In parenting, I often say we're not going to ask questions that there's no answer to. We're going to either get an answer, or we're going to stop asking the question.

Remember, your thoughts are not, nor need to be, true or untrue. They're just thoughts. That means, as a parent, you have full authority and agency over your mind to make up answers or to come up with answers that soothe your brain, serve you, serve your child and your relationship. I know many of us fear that we're going to get it wrong. We're afraid to believe that thoughts might not be true.

Did you ever notice how willing we are to believe negative thoughts that might not be true? Like he's lazy, or he's going to end up living under a bridge with a shopping cart one day. Thoughts are just thoughts. They're not true or untrue. One can't go into a court of law and prove that someone's lazy. We can prove they're unemployed. We can prove they don't have a job. We can prove they've been fired for a job for lack of effort. But we can't prove that they're lazy. These are just thoughts.

Here's what I want you to know. You do not have to believe the negative thoughts about yourself, about your kids, about their motive, about where

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they're going to end up. You are 100% free to believe the positive ones. You can choose thoughts like she does that to get on my nerves, or he does that because he's lazy.

Or you can choose thoughts like it's just a harmless habit that she'll outgrow. He finds value in taking risk. Maybe one day he will use that to change the world for the better. Or you could have a thought like instead of he's lazy. Yeah, he doesn't do everything I tell him to do the first time, but who does? He isn't capable of keeping track of all of his stuff yet.

You get to choose your thoughts, and you get to choose to stop questioning why every time your kid makes a mistake or something goes wrong. Why won't she eat her vegetables? Why is she obsessed with sugar? Why won't she listen to me? It is a choice to no longer allow your brain to conjure up the why question.

If you're motivated to change the way you react when your child does a thing, you have to start with changing the way you feel when they do it. Doesn't make it right. Doesn't mean you don't want them to stop. But if you change the way you feel, you will be able to respond rather than react.

You're probably listening to this episode because ultimately that's your goal. You'd like to stay calm and regulated when your child does something or doesn't do something, and you'd like to respond rather than react. One of the best ways I know to do it is to choose your thoughts when they do X, and choose to stop asking the why questions.

So, in summary, if you want to change the way you react when your child does a thing, change the way you feel about it. How you ask? Okay, Lisa, I want to do that but how? Well, you do it by changing your thoughts about it. You will be amazed, astonished, thrilled, delighted, encouraged by how much connection this will bring to your relationship with your kid or kids.

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Where there is connection, there is cooperation. So let that be your motivation to drop the Y and manage your thoughts when your children do X.

Yeah. Awesome. I know you got this. I believe in you. I'm not even going to ask why. I believe you can do this. You can manage your mind. You can choose your thoughts, all the while helping your kids grow and evolve and turn on the internal compass and not hit their brother and find their water bottle and not sneak out and not slam the door or roll their eyes.

You can change your thoughts, which will change your feelings. You can manage your thoughts. You can supervise your brain, and you can drop the dreaded why so that you experience less of a gap between expectation and reality and decrease the frustration. You got this. I know it. So proud of you. Okay, until we meet again. I'm wishing you peaceful parenting.

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

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