

Ep #120: What to Do When the Co-parenting Feels Uneven



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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. I am so excited to be with you here today. For today's episode, I invite you to place yourself in this scene. Imagine, which may not be hard for some of you, that you do 80 to 90% of the heavy lifting in your household when it comes to parenting your kids.

You have a co-parent who engages in the work of parenting maybe 20% of the time with you side by side and another 10% of the time on their own without you. Sound familiar? This is what you've either agreed upon, or you've somehow managed to slip into this role. But either way, you likely stay in this role because you know this is what works best for you and your family, and it keeps the household running fairly smoothly most of the time.

Now maybe you've agreed that your co-parent does the other heavy lifting work for your family. Maybe your co-parent works more hours outside the home while you stay home and run the household, plan and prep all the meals, do the laundry, take care of the dog, plan the family's social events, activities, or vacations, and parent the kids. Are you with me so far?

Now, let's say you have a small window of opportunity for your co-parent to fulfill that elusive 10% of the parenting time without you. Maybe you work a job outside of the home or you take care of a parent or you volunteer at the hospital or you go to the gym or you take a little me time for some much needed retail therapy 10% of the time.

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Whatever it is, you tag out, and you put your mind on something other than the household and parenting for what feels like an incredibly short amount of time. Yeah? It may not feel restful because other people may still be counting on you to sacrifice your time, energy, and thoughts, but still it's your break away from your family and your home and your traditional normal to-dos. So you relish it.

Now, here comes the stinger. Imagine that while you're away doing whatever it is you do, work out, get your nails done, spend time with your mother, go out for cocktails with a girlfriend. Imagine that while you're away counting on your co-parent to be successful and self-sufficient for a minimal amount of time, your co-parent texts you to ask you a question about the kids. Or they text you to ask you how to do something that you do all the time, or they text you to ask you what they should serve the kids for dinner. Yeah?

Or how about this. You walk in the door exhausted from lugging around all the other hats you have to wear outside the home, like work or maybe volunteering, or taking care of something. You walk in the door exhausted, and your co-parent immediately starts in with all the things that exasperated them about the kids while you were out.

Can you picture it? You walk in. You're barely in the door. You haven't even taken your coat off, and your co-parent is right there with a scroll of all the things that went wrong tonight or today while you were out. I can just see it so clearly. Can you?

So let me ask you what thoughts come to your mind in that moment? What thoughts? How do those thoughts make you feel? Do you wrestle with thoughts that you should empathize with the co-parent? Because, I mean, come on. You know how hard it is to be on your own with your kids. Heck, you do it all the time.

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While at the same time feeling resentful, frustrated, and angry because, I mean, come on. Why can't they just handle it? I mean, you handle it all the time. You handle it and then some like a boss. You don't complain every night when they come home. You don't list off or rattle off all the mistakes, fights, or meltdowns that took place all day while you were caring for your kids and doing laundry and cooking dinner and returning phone calls and signing permission slips. And, and, and, and. Right? Sound familiar?

Now, maybe you try to convince yourself that they deserve a break because they work so hard outside the home. I'm sure they do work hard. Maybe you're trying to convince yourself that you should be understanding because they don't really know what they're doing home alone with the kids, right? But at the same time, you feel like you can't or shouldn't get away because they can't handle it. Then the guilt sets in for even going out in the first place or taking some me time or something else.

Oh, I know this story so well. This is what one frustrated mom told me on a Hive call recently. We dug into this deeply, and I asked her to really question her feelings. She told me, "Lisa, I'm trying to have empathy for my husband. I'm trying." I asked her to check in with herself and really dig down to what was really going on for her, like really.

I asked her, do you really feel bad for your co-parent when you take a 10% break and he buckles to the pressure of having to parent on his own? She said to me, "Well, I think I'm supposed to feel bad. I mean, I'm supposed to be there for him and support him. I know he struggles with the kids while I'm away. So I guess I tell myself I'm supposed to feel bad. But instead of feeling bad and empathy for him, I feel a whole host of other feelings, like frustrated and resentful and angry and disappointed."

Now, if you can relate to this, I challenge you to examine this pattern of thoughts. Again, maybe you think you should, or maybe you're working

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really hard at empathizing with your co-parent, especially if when you get home, they're dysregulated. Your brain wants you to feel bad for them. I mean you love them and you love your kids, and while you're gone, you want their time together to be rainbows and unicorns. Let's be real.

At the same time, you might be having thoughts that what you really want is your co-parent to figure things out on their own. Here's the kicker. You really, really, really don't want to hear about their parenting struggles. When they're spending alone time with the kids 10% of the time and you're alone with them 90% of the time, right? I mean, come on. Just figure things out. I do. So the key to this, the key to unwinding this big, old, hot mess is to start with being honest with yourself about your own feelings and needs and go from there.

Then I want you to hear this. You and your co-parent are two completely different people with completely different skill sets capable of totally different things. This, right here, drastically improved my marriage and my ability to co-parent with my husband. So let me say it again. You and your co-parent are two completely different people capable of totally different things with completely different skill sets.

In my marriage, I'm really good at focusing on the tasks and the small details while my husband is really good at seeing the big picture. What that translates day to day in our lives is that I can get 10 times the amount of tasks done in a day that he does. Sometimes he overlooks things or doesn't get done into the weeds in the small details because he's always thinking about the big picture.

So when he spends his time with our son one on one, it looks completely different than the things that get done when I spend time with our son. This is just a fact. We're very different people capable of different things with different skill sets.

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When I realized this, what I was able to do is stop arguing with reality. I stopped expecting him to do the things that I do when I'm home alone with our son. Changing your expectations and understanding that you're completely different people with different skill sets is one of the most helpful things you can do on the path to peacefully co-parenting with your co-parent.

So let me say that again. I stopped expecting him to behave or do or execute in the same exact way that I do when I'm home alone with our son. We have to recognize that as co-parent, we have different strengths. It's an invitation to lower our expectations that our co-parent will meet us strength for strength. It's just not the reality of the situation.

Remember, frustration is the gap between expectation and reality. The bigger the gap, the bigger the frustration. So the more I expect my co-parent to be exactly like me while I'm away, the bigger the frustration. I know in my case, my husband is never going to execute the same amount of tasks that I execute when I'm at home and vice versa.

What I've come to realize is that I can't change the reality of that. We're different people with different skill sets. So if I want to feel less frustration, I have to lower my expectation of how it's going to go when he's running the show here at home while I'm away. The most helpful thing you can do for yourself is to stop arguing with reality and give your co-parent permission, not that they need it from you, but give them permission to struggle while you're away.

Ah, right? Hopefully some of you are having lightbulbs right now. Let me say it again. The most helpful thing you can do in your co-parenting relationship is stop arguing with reality and give your co-parent permission, not that they need it from you, but give them permission to struggle and do

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it wrong. Give your kids permission to struggle and storm while you're away.

It doesn't mean that they don't love their co-parent, and it doesn't mean that the co-parent doesn't love their kids. It doesn't mean that you can't step away or go away. It doesn't mean any of that. What it does mean is that your co-parent doesn't make the chicken nuggets the way that you do. It means your kid's brain isn't used to the habit of dad putting him to bed. It means your co-parent has trouble calming a three-year-old boy and two two-year-old twins at the same time, and you're a pro at it because you do it all day every day.

So what to do if this scenario of frustration and tit-for-tat scorekeeping resonates with you? What to do? Well, I strongly encourage you to tell your co-parent what you need in these moments. You come home, and you're met at the door with a litany of frustrations that have happened over the course of the evening, and your co-parent is venting to you. You have to be honest and tell your co-parent what you need in these moments.

It might sound like this. Sweetheart, I mean this with the most love in my heart, I do not want to hear about the frustrations you've had when you are home alone with the kids tonight when I'm home alone with them 90% of the time. I don't want to hear about it, and it's not good for our marriage. If there's a problem or you need information, we can discuss that.

If you simply need to vent that tonight was difficult because parenting is hard, please call your mother or your sister or your buddy to vent to them but do not vent to me. It's not good for our marriage. It ruins my evening. It makes me resentful. It makes me angry at you, and I stew over it. It makes me pull away from you, and I don't want that for our marriage.

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Now, many people tell me that they believe that in order for them to have a strong relationship with their partner that happens to be their co-parent that venting is part of the job description. “My partner needs to vent to me, Lisa, often and freely.” Maybe about a lot of topics they do, and they can, and they're allowed to. Maybe they vent to you about their mother or work or friend that they have. I get that.

But when you've been away from the evening for 10% of the time, when you're with the kids 90% of the time, and you're going to get your shot at going out. You've had a lovely evening, or you're exhausted from the work you put in, and you come home, and your co-parent is going to vent to you about your own children, that's when the mama bear is going to come out. That's when you're going to keep score. That's when resentment and frustration is going to build.

So I believe that it's okay to ask for what we need. When I come home from a lovely evening out of having dinner with a couple girlfriends, I don't want to hear you vent to me about how stressful your evening was parenting our children. It's okay to say that. In fact, it enhances the relationship.

Strong, healthy, lasting relationships are based on honesty, vulnerability, and trust. When you can honestly express to your partner what you need, you give them an opportunity to respond with gentleness and eagerness to be the one who can satisfy that need. That's what builds connection. Not using each other to vent all the time, especially about our kids.

I often tell my husband I don't want to hear you vent about our son and our frustrations. It's not good for me. It's not good for our marriage, and it brings out the mama bear in me that gets angry at you. As soon as I say it to my husband, he understands it. He may not like it, but he understands it. He has an idea of how much this bothers me.

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You can't expect your co-parent, your partner, to read your mind and recognize your every need. You need to do your part in voicing your needs to them. If one of your needs is please don't vent to me about our children after I've been out for a fun evening or I've gone in the evenings to my other job or I've been over helping my mother clean out a closet, which you know I don't enjoy in the first place. The last thing I want to come home to is you venting about our children.

Listen, you can do this in a gentle way when you're both regulated. What I know for sure is it will benefit your intimacy when you can be honest about your feelings and needs. When you allow your co-parent to vent to you about the 10% of the time they're doing something that you spend 90% of your time doing, this also contributes to the keeping score and resentment. Think about that for a minute.

Then we fixate on and resent that they're not doing it right. So they feel better, maybe from venting, but now we feel awful. We feel angry. We feel frustrated. We're keeping score. We're mad that they can't do it right. We're mad that they have to tell us in the first place and get frustrated from the evening.

Then in comes all the martyr thoughts like well, I guess I just can't go anywhere. I guess I shouldn't go out. Well, that ruined my evening. That's a good time shot in the foot. It's not worth going out traveling or working. We have these thoughts, and then the guilt sets in. Then the frustration sets in because we can never get away.

Are you with me? I know. I know this story. I used to live it. I used to be caught in this cycle of resentment, anger, keeping score, and frustration. Then I made the decision to step out of it and ask my co-parent not to vent to me about our kid, and it was an absolute game changer. If you're stuck in this trap and cycle, I want this for you.

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So let's recap. You maybe doing 80 to 90% of the heavy lifting in your household when it comes to parenting. Yes, it's a fact there may be an unevenness. You do more than your co-parent, and that's okay. Yes, it's not 50/50 most of the time. So there's no point in keeping score and playing tit-for-tat. There's no point in doing it.

It's also important to realize that you and your co-parent are two completely different people with two completely different skill sets. It's also important to realize that you're allowed to take breaks. And, not or, and your co-parent is allowed to struggle with the time that he or she spends with your kids alone and do it very differently than you would do it. Those are all ands, not or's. I'm allowed to go out. He's allowed to do it differently, and he's allowed to struggle. While I'm away, my kids are allowed to struggle and storm, and that's okay. It doesn't mean anything about me as a parent.

It's also important to realize that while I'm away, my co-parent, my experience frustration, dysregulation, and storming, and that's okay. I can go out and expect this. So I can manage the gap between expectation and reality thus decreasing my frustration. It's important to realize I don't have to empathize with the struggle, especially if it's not sincere. If you don't really feel empathy, don't fake it.

Lastly, I can state what I need to my partner. Like when I come home, I'd love to hear what went well. If you need to vent about our kids from the evening, find someone else to vent to. Yeah? I hope this is landing.

I hope if you're trapped in the cycle of frustration and venting and keeping score, and then feeling like you're not allowed to go out or you can't or all H – E- double toothpick breaks out when I go out. Therefore I just guess I can't go out ever again or enjoy myself because although I have fun while I'm out, when I get home I hear all about it. Suddenly I'm dysregulated alongside my co-parent, and my whole evening's been ruined.

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If you're trapped in the cycle, I invite you to step out of it. The other side of the cycle, freedom, asking for what you need, putting some limits and boundaries up, and allowing your co-parent to struggle and still loving them and your kids and not making it mean anything about you feels like absolute freedom. I want that for you. Okay. Work at this. It's work worth doing, I promise. 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.