

Ep #142: How to Use Rules to Create Connection with Your Kids



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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 thrilled to be with you here today and to talk with you about something that is really near and dear to my heart, which is connecting with your kids through rules. Yep, that's what I said, rules. It is possible. You can connect with your kids while setting and enforcing rules.

We're about a month into dropping my son off at college and coming home as bird launchers, as I like to say, rather than empty nesters. I haven't had a chance to have a lot of interaction with my son. He's very busy his freshman semester away at college.

But one thing we have talked about is the value of rules. He's been able to share with me that he set some rules for himself because he understands how they benefit him, and how they help them stay on target, on goal, and on path. I really think he's able to do this because we were able to set rules, my husband and I, for many years through connection, not in spite of or round or instead of connection. So let's dive into this topic, and see if I can provide some new ideas, some new thoughts, and help in some way.

So to dive in, let me ask you, are you struggling to find ways to connect with your kids and enjoy parenting because he, she, or they seem to be struggling all the time or struggling in so many areas? Grades, chores, making their own lunch, getting out the door in the morning, helping the family, getting off the screen, not getting on screens when they're not supposed to.

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Does it feel like you can't quite get it right in the home? Nothing is really clicking on all cylinders? Do you feel like you're on the struggle bus in setting and enforcing rules and just getting some level of cooperation all the time? I remember those days. If you said yes to one or all of that, please hear that you are not alone.

I remember those days. I remember them being exhausting, feeling never ending, and like there's no light at the end of the tunnel. My goal today is to really show you a different way that will help you feel more successful as a parent, and at the same time, more connected to your kid or kids.

Now, here's what I know. We often get really dysregulated by all the mistakes our kids make or all the things they don't seem to be doing well or correctly. We get so dysregulated that we accidentally or unknowingly get caught up in focusing on all the little things that they're not doing right, or to our liking, or either.

Then what happens is then we build up this belief that nothing's going well, or they can't do anything right. Then our brain starts to provide all this evidence that they're not doing anything right. So we either live in fear or anger, which leads to dysregulation as a parent.

Then we start entertaining the thoughts that we just can't get a reprieve. We just can't get on the right track. All of that leads to a lack of connection, feeling seen, heard, and valued by our kids and imagine they must feel not seen, not heard, and not valued by us. Frustration, exasperation, and wit's end set in. If I'm honest with you, I used to marinate 24/7 in frustration, exasperation, and wit's end. I know that it doesn't feel good. I know.

Are you relating to this? Does this sound familiar to you? Do you feel like I have a camera in your house right now, and I'm telling your story? I get it. I get it. But here's the good news. I'm here to help. Just by listening to

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today's episode and reframing and doing a couple things slightly differently, you can have a whole new approach and feel connected to your kids while setting rules. It's not going to take a lot of effort on your part, I promise.

So let's dig in. Now, here's the thing that I want you to work on. We have to catch our kids doing things right, bolded, underlined, exclamation point. This is absolutely critical, absolutely critical. We have to catch our kids doing things right often, weekly, daily, hourly, little things, big things. I promise you. There are things every single day your kids are doing right or well or to your liking.

I challenge you, beg you, ask you, demand that you go out and find things that your kids are doing right. Then we have to stop focusing on all the things they're doing wrong. So that's step number two. Step number one is catch them doing things right. Step number two is stop focusing on all the things they're doing wrong.

Then step number three is prioritize what is really, really, really important to you that they do well. You're probably looking or expecting too many things. Maybe even things that they are not developmentally capable of. A five-year-old is not going to remember to brush his teeth every night. A nine year old may not be able to do a checklist of nine things every morning before school Monday through Friday 52 weeks a year.

So what I want to encourage you to do is simplify. What I want to encourage you to do is define no more than three to four of your highest core family values, or said another way three to four things that right now, right now are really, really, really important to you. Write them down, post them on the fridge.

Let's get clear. You can only have four things, maximum of four things. Some of you have 27, 85, 14 things you want your kids to do. Newsflash,

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late breaking news, they're not developmentally capable of doing 14 things really well. So what you end up getting is 14 things done poorly. Make sense?

So once you've identified your four really important things and different problems, circumstances, or bad habits arise, you need to just pick the four things that support your core family values and work on solutions to just those four things and let everything else go.

If you try to focus on everything at once, here's what happens. You are constantly dysregulated, you feel like nothing is going right or well. Your kids don't have a chance to be successful and build their esteem. Your kids have underdeveloped brains. So in some cases, it's going to take years to be an expert at something.

So, for instance, if one of your core family values is to do your job and do it well, and your kid is slacking on homework and not turning things in on time and not taking the time to study for tests then put all of your energy into finding out what's really going on in this situation, and find ways to meet the needs. Coach your kid. Put systems in place that will lead to getting all the homework turned in and study time for tests.

Don't let things like a messy room or sneaking snacks or forgetting to brush their teeth get in the way or be on the agenda. Don't let them provide evidence to your belief that your kid can't do anything right. Let those things go. Those will get resolved at some point.

If you overcomplicate things, our kids can't follow along with what we're saying. You have to believe that they'll figure those other things out eventually, or that you can focus on them down the road. Because here's the truth, energy is a limited resource. Your energy, your focus, their energy, and their focus. We need to spend it wisely on things that really

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matter to us. We need to conserve our energy when it comes to the minor things that are just a nuisance or not really important or just serve as evidence of negative things.

The problem as parents with overcomplicating your rules and limits and expectations is that you're just going to end up feeling stressed, in fight or flight, and like a nag all the time who's not getting any results. You might say things to yourself like nobody listens to me around here. It might be because you've overcomplicated your rules, limits, and expectations.

When you do that, you are much more likely to get dysregulated and storm alongside your kids. Which ironically isn't good going to allow either of you to make any progress in doing things well. So you want to pick up to four things that deserve your energy right now and write them down. Be clear about them.

Don't just say keep a clean room. Define what that means to you. No wet towels on the floor, all clothes picked up off the floor, desk clean, and no dirty dishes in the bedroom, let's say. So you want to write those down. You want to write down what's important to you, and how you define it and be crystal clear.

Then you want to communicate what's important to you to your whole family as your family's current focus. You can make it quarterly, or you can make it for things that are important during the school year and four things that are important during the summer. Four things that are important during the holidays. Or it can be a quarterly focus or yearly focus, keep it simple. Right? That saying's stuck around for a lot of years because it's important, helpful, and true.

Now, as you're presenting the rules to the family, you want to be empathetic and firm about your boundaries, and just work to help your kids follow

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through. Here's the real secret sauce to setting these rules and limits. You want to approach it like you know without a shadow of a doubt that you all are going to be successful at accomplishing this. It's just a matter of time.

Let me say that again because that is like the secret sauce in all of this. You want to approach with an attitude, a belief, an energy, and a knowledge that all of you are going to achieve this goal or rule. It's just a matter of time. You have to believe they're capable of it. You have to demonstrate that you believe that to them. I cannot tell you how important this is.

If you approach it like well, I don't know, kid. I don't know if this is going to work out, or you're probably not going to be able to do this. They're going to pick up on that. That's going to be their belief. So you have to go all in, even if they're horrible at it right now. Right? I mean, we all birth our kids with the belief they're going to walk and talk and be able to feed themselves and get out of diapers. We're not like well, I don't know, Lisa. Boy, I give her a 50/50 shot at being able to walk. I'm just not sure. Right?

So we want to approach the belief in the exact same way and be firm with the boundaries. Because once their brains learn that consequences matter and they count because you're going to follow through, it's going to be easier for them to find a way to get with the program.

Here's the thing, if you're setting a bunch of superfluous limits on things that don't really matter, or you're piling on item after item every time something goes wrong, you're just exhausting yourself and your kids, setting them up for failure, and increasing the probability that you won't follow through on limits.

Then your kid learns that limits and consequences don't really matter. See that? So this is why it's so important to stick to just two, three, or four things

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that really matter right now. Set the limits and the consequences and use your energy to follow through on the three or four that you set. Don't pile on. It's a recipe for disaster, I promise you.

If you're co-parenting with someone in the same household, make sure they're on board with the three or four. Because while you're enforcing one, the last thing you want them to do is come and pile on five or 10 or 16 more. So, again, the goal is to pick three or four that really matter, that are focused on what's important to you, what you believe in, what your family values are.

Maybe it's keeping a clean home. Maybe it's getting places on time. Maybe it's doing what you say you're going to do. Really connect the dots. When you set the limits and consequences and then use your energy to follow through on them, success is around the corner. This is a great way to model for your kids how to discern priorities and show them that what you say you value. Basically, you're walking your talk when you use this method.

What a great thing to teach our kids. Our word matters. We do what we say we're going to do. We plan the work and work the plan, right. It's important for our kids to learn that rules count. That truthfully, no one is above the rules. But the rules have to be developmentally appropriate and simple so they can understand and follow them.

Now sometimes we adopt the attitude that rules are made to be broken. But it's also true that when rules are broken, there are consequences. There's varying degrees of consequences and suffering when it comes to paying the consequences of breaking different degrees of rules. But let's be honest, there's always consequences. To argue that no rules are ever to be broken would make us hypocritical as parents.

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I do speed sometimes. I know the rule is there. But sometimes I'm in a hurry. I'm excited. I get cooking along, and I speed. Part of developing executive function for your kids is figuring out which rules need to be followed all the time, which rules can be bent, and which rules can be discounted. That's life, right?

I got a ticket once for not paying attention going 40 miles an hour in a school zone. Now I am not proud of it. School was not in session. I got distracted. I got cooking along, and I missed the sign on the side of the road. I didn't realize I was in a school zone.

Let me tell you something people, this girl right here does not do that anymore. It was a painful speeding ticket. I felt really bad. I was really embarrassed. Now, I don't do that anymore. Absolutely not. I see a school zone, and I probably go under. The guy or person behind me is probably frustrated. Come on lady, get going. So I don't do that because I figured out that is not a rule. I want to bend the consequence is way too high. I would never want to hurt someone in my car.

Now if I get on the freeway, and the speed limit is 65, do I go over? Yeah, I do. We drive pretty fast here in Arizona. I do. I often go over 65. If I get a ticket doing that, I can live with it. Now hopefully the universe isn't going to say oh yeah, lady? Let's test that next week. So y'all send me some good juju that I don't get a ticket. Okay, but I am willing to bend that rule. I understand the consequences, and I can live with it.

I do not drink and drive past the legal limit. Nope. I understand that as one rule I do not mess with. Do I steal from people? Nope, nope. I don't see someone's purse open in HomeGoods and reach in and grab \$100 bill. I don't do that. I don't do that. That is a rule that I don't even contemplate breaking. Not only because it's a law, that's just not who I am and not

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something I would ever want to do. I 100% follow it because I believe it is the right thing to do.

So it would be hypocritical to expect your kids to follow every rule all the time and to get mad at them and punish them when they don't do it. We need to help our kids learn to discern which rules are no bend rules, which rules consequences are more acceptable.

So you and your co-parent need to decide which family rules are no bend rules. You can even use this language with your kids. So they understand that you will be hyper-focused on the no bend rules. You will absolutely follow through on their limits and consequences.

There might be sort of bend or occasionally bend rules that you might let some of the lesser consequences to those rules go, which is why you want to figure out what your three or four no bend rules are, and articulate them to your kids clearly, often, in different ways.

We don't want no bend rules to be surprises to our kids. Remember, you want to keep the list of no bend rules short. This is really important. If we want to turn on the internal compass in our kids, we need to keep the list of no bend rules short so that my brain development and brain capacity and brain can understand and learn these no bend roles and turn on my internal compass.

Then we want to assign consequences to the no bend rules that you will have no problem following through on. It is important, especially when parenting strong willed kids, for them to learn that there are no bend rules in the world. The no bend rules have very severe consequences attached to them. We teach this by talking, by modeling, by languaging, by writing them out, by visiting them over and over and over again.

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We teach them by keeping it really, really, really simple. Few rules, easy to follow and understand, easy to understand the consequences and easy to communicate to them with clear direction. Yeah? It's really important. My husband says to our son all the time in this family, we have few rules, but the rules that we do have we expect you to follow. If you choose not to follow them, we want you to understand the consequences before you break the rules. Pretty good, huh?

Okay. When your kid, especially the strong willed ones, come at you because you're enforcing the rule, you get dysregulated by their excuses or blame or disapproval of your rules. It's easy to slip into dysregulation. They're not going to be happy that you're enforcing the rules and excited and jumping for joy. They're not.

They're not even, especially strong willed kids sometimes, going to be neutral about it. They're going to blame, disapprove, try to power struggle over setting the consequence. This often dysregulates us as the parent, and we're going to want to judge their character, instead of holding space with an inner confidence that they're going to turn out okay even when they break certain rules.

You have to believe it's all going to work out. You've got to hold space that this is part of the process of turning on the internal compass. It's not realistic to expect because I set the rule, my kid's gonna follow it every single time and get it right. If you can accept this, if you can hold space that it's going to work out and stay regulated when they break the rule, and manage your expectations, you will stay far more regulated when they storm over the consequence.

I say this all the time to my clients. In some ways, it's literally in our kids' job descriptions to push back, to fight over rules, to get mad, and to not like them. It's part of the method of learning. Accept that. You still enforce them,

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but you accept that it's their job to push back, to fight over the rules, to get mad, and not like them.

At the same time, you can know the deep inside when rules are put in place, if they're easy to understand and simple, and they make sense and they're logical, and they surround family values, then those rules help kids feel loved and know what is expected of them. It creates a sense of safety that they can rest in, even while their brains are still growing and developing. Even while they're hardwired to push back and resist the consequence.

Oh my gosh, I hope so many light bulbs are going off for you right now. Oh, I love that I get to bring this to you today. I love it so much. When I figured this out, when I connected these dots with my strong willed fourth grader, fifth grader, eighth grader, ninth grader, kid going off to college, I was able to stay regulated while setting the rules, while communicating the rules, while enforcing the rules, and while getting pushed back to the rules because I saw the bigger picture.

I didn't take it personally. I didn't judge him. I held space that this was all going to work out. This was part of the process. When I started to doubt myself, I would look at the rules and I would say are they simple? Are they focused on her family values? Have I communicated them well?

If I could say yes to those then I would say to myself okay, he's pushing back and rules help him feel safe, loved, and know what is expected. That would further regulate me. Because what I know is that it is so much more valuable to you, your kids, and your relationship for you to stay regulated and help them work through the consequences, through the suffering of the consequence being enforced, for pushing past the rules and the limits, for learning the process.

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Part of the human experience is to understand that our greatest rule breakers are often our teenagers. They are at the prime time in their development. It is literally prime time in their brain development, in their body development, to push limits, test boundaries, increased risk, question authority, and learn responsibility. It's part of the brain development process. It's the push-pull dynamic. It's our job to not take that push-pull personally, to understand that this is what they do while resting in the safety of rules.

Dr. Francis Jensen teaches us, quote, the most important part of the human brain, the place where actions are waited, situations judged, and decisions made is right behind the forehead in the frontal lobes. Unfortunately for us parents, this is the last part of the brain to develop. That is why you need to be your kids, at any age, frontal lobes until their brains are fully wired, hooked up, and ready to go on their own. Yeah?

Here's one example of what this looks like. You may have a limit that your teenager needs to put his clothes away after you've done the laundry. You may tell them I'm going to put your clothes on your bed when I'm done doing all the laundry in baskets, and your job is to put all the clothes away inside the drawers and the closet with closet doors shut. See how clear I am there?

So let's say you tell your teen the signal will be the clothes are on the bed, inside baskets. The rule is you need to put them away. Here's the definition of put away. Inside drawers with the drawers shut, inside the closet hanging up, not thrown in the closet on the floor, inside the closet hanging up on the rack. If you choose not to do this, then I will stop washing your clothes, and you will assume the responsibility of washing, drying, and putting your clothes away. Okay. You can follow that right? So let's say that's a limit in your house.

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It centers on the value of taking care of your things. It centers on the value of pitching in, of taking good care of clothes that we've worked hard to spend money on, assuming chores in the family, and doing your part. So you state this limit to your kid.

So you give your kid three or four times, and they're not putting their laundry away. They're throwing it on the floor. You come in the bedroom, and you see all the hard work you've put into laundry thrown onto the floor in a big pile. So you decide the consequence is I'm not doing your laundry anymore. So you announced this to your 14 year old son. Hey, I asked you to do your part. You're not doing it. So I'm not going to wash, dry, or put your clothes away anymore. You're going to be completely in charge of your laundry.

Now, here's the secret. Your kid says okay, fine. I'll do it and walks away. It's important as a parent at this point to let go. It's important to not hover and badger your kid. Did you do your laundry? Did you do your laundry? Did you do your laundry? You know you need a clean uniform. You need clothes for school. Are you giving yourself enough time to do it?

He's not going to feel the full weight of the consequences unless he has poor planning and has to wear a dirty, sweaty, smelly uniform to soccer practice or to a game. You have to let him follow all the way through on the negative consequence and feel the weight of that. That is the consequence of not putting the clothes away that you cleaned for him in the first place.

That will lead to him figuring it out, either by taking over and learning how to do laundry, how to plan ahead, when to do it, all the things that are part of it, which requires executive function to wash and dry his soccer uniform before practice. Which he might have to figure out well to wash and dry and outfit takes on average 30 minutes to wash, 30 minutes to dry. I can't start at 10 minutes before we leave.

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If you're trying to teach him the lesson that not putting his clothes away in the drawers and throwing on the floor after you took the time to wash, dry, and fold it, he loses the privilege of you doing his laundry then you have to allow him the space to fail and suffer the consequences. That is how he will learn to care for the laundering of his clothes, or to come to you and ask for a do over and then follow the rule of putting his clothes away by putting them in the drawers and shutting the drawers and hanging them up rather than throwing them on the floor.

Following him around and hounding him to get his laundry done isn't conserving or managing your energy your thoughts. The purpose of the consequence is to learn the lesson. If you continually rob your kids of the opportunity of making mistakes and learning and maybe in some cases suffering the consequences, then you're robbing them of the lesson.

So let's set our kids up for success instead of failure. Let's teach them that while they're in our care, yes, there are degrees of rules. Those that can be discounted, those that can be bent, and those that are no bend rules. There are differing degrees of consequences when the rules are broken. Yeah?

You start by defining your family values. Make that list of short no bend rules with appropriate limits, appropriate for the situation, appropriate developmentally, appropriate in what you're asking, and then follow through on the consequences. Support your most important family values.

Then consider loosening the reins on all the other peripheral personal preferences you may have or want. Allow whitespace for your kids to make mistakes and suffer the consequences. Give them room to learn and grow all while managing your energy and enjoying parenting your kids. This is the secret to feeling productive as a parent when it comes to getting things done.

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So in summary, I suggest setting limits and consequences for specific area's importance to you as a parent while allowing flexibility in other aspects around the house with your child's behavior and outside the home. It's really important that you remember that children are still developing and learning. The cake is still baking. It's not done until the age of 25.

It's also important to remember as they grow into the teen years, and some do this even in the younger years, but it's natural, especially for strong willed kids, to push boundaries and make mistakes. By focusing on the most important values and goals, you will conserve your energy and avoid feeling overwhelmed when parenting and with life because you're conserving your energy to focus on the things that really matter, the three or four no bend rules.

It's important to hold space for your child's pushback and resistance, recognizing that it's part of the development process. Providing consequences for their actions, and allowing them to experience the natural outcome of their choices and of their behavior can be a valuable learning opportunity. I would say overall, this approach aims to create a balance and a supportive environment for your child's growth while maintaining your own well-being as a parent.

Let me say that again. This approach, this recipe here today in this episode, I really wanted to help you create a balance and a supportive environment for your child's growth while maintaining your own well-being as a parent, because that's important, and it matters. Every family is unique. So it's important to create the rules for you based on what is important to your family values and then adapt these strategies to suit your situation. Your family makeup, your family dynamics, your schedule, the things that are important to you.

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The last thing I want to say about this is please, please, please remember to maintain open communication and empathy with your child as you navigate through setting the limits and following through on them. Yeah. Oh, that's so good, isn't it? Gosh, I love it so much. I love that I got to share this with you today. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. 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 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.