

Ep. #228: Why “Calm Down” Doesn’t Work — And What to Say Instead



Full Episode Transcript

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 grateful. You're here with me today. Imagine this, your 8-year-old bursts through the door after school, throws their backpack on the floor and starts crying about a math test your instinct, honey. Calm down. It's just a test. And then the meltdown intensifies.

Sound familiar? Well, that moment when our words meant to help actually make things worse, that's what we're diving into today. In our house, we have a simple but powerful rule. We don't say calm down to each other, ever. Ever. Not me to my son, not my son to me, not between any family members. And if someone slips up, anyone has the permission to gently call them out on it, and sometimes maybe not so gently, no shame, just accountability.

Why? Because we've learned the hard way that calm down doesn't help. In fact, it almost always makes things worse. Our kids don't need to be calmed down. They need to feel safe enough to calm themselves. Let me say that again. 'cause it's very powerful. Our kids need to feel safe enough to calm themselves.

Today we're exploring why calm down shuts connection down, and what to say instead, and how your words can become the lifeline your child needs in their most vulnerable moments. So let me share a powerful story from a client that illustrates the power of one sentence before we dive into alternatives to calm down, let me tell you about Sarah.

A mom in our hive community who has a very spirited 6-year-old son named Nolan. One day Nolan came from from school and completely, and I mean, completely lost it because they were out of his favorite afterschool snack. We're talking screaming tears, fist clenched, the whole meltdown package. Sarah shared with me during a hive call.

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Lisa, I wanted to snap. Everything in me wanted to say it's just a snack. Calm down. But instead, she took a deep breath. She made sure she was responsive rather than reactive. She got down on his level and said, oh, buddy, you really wanted that snack. I can see that this is hard, and I'm right here with you.

Sarah said, Nolan paused, actually paused. His body softened. He crawled into her lap and sobbed, and then they talked about his day, and it turns out that his teacher had corrected him in front of his whole class and other kids laughed at him and he'd been holding in big feelings all day, and hopefully what you can see is what Sarah gave him wasn't a solution to the snack problem.

She gave him permission. To feel and created a safe environment for him to let it out and then calm himself down. Now, let's get real when our kids are losing it, melting down over socks or storms, or spilled cereal or being left out of a birthday party, or the soccer team losing. We just want peace and what do we often say?

Calm down. Stop crying. You're fine. That's enough. We say these things, not because we're bad parents, but because we're overwhelmed too. I get it. The problem is that when a child hears calm down during a big emotional moment, the brain doesn't register safety, it registers dismissal. Feel like I need to say that again.

The problem is. When a child, and many times an adult hears calm down during a big emotional moment, their brain doesn't register safety. It registers dismissal, and then it reactivates the storm. We've all been there, right? And here's what's happening in your child's brain during a meltdown. When kids are upset, their thinking brains go offline.

The prefrontal cortex. It literally, this is science. It goes offline, and that's the part they need. That's the part that handles logic and reason. And this means that when your kid is melting down, they can't access coping skills and tools. They can't follow directions, and are you ready for this? They can't just calm down.

It's physically impossible. What's online instead, their emotional alarm system. The part that triggers fight, flight, or freeze, or if they've been doing it long enough and they're really living in a dominant household and they're scared. It also triggers

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Fawn where they behave and follow directions out of a sense of fear, not their internal compass.

But that's an episode for a different day. But let me bring you back to this. You know, this will make you laugh, but it's totally true trying to reason. With a melting down IE dysregulated child is like trying to teach math to someone being chased by a bear. It just won't work, right? Imagine someone's being chased by a bear and you're trying to teach them math ain't gonna happen.

What will help your calm presence is what helps. Their brain come back online. It reboots the brain. It's like powering down your phone and turning it back on. Your calm presence is what helps their brain come back online. This is co-regulation, the foundation of peaceful parenting. So how do we do this?

How do we be the calm presence? Well, here's what actually works. Loving eye contact. A soft tone, simple language. Your regulated energy, safe presence. And what about our words? They matter too. The right phrase can become the bridge. Your child needs to move from meltdown to calm. So here are five powerful phrases you can use instead of calm down.

Words that will actually work. Words that create safety and connection when your child needs it most, instead of calm down, say, I'm right here with you. This works because these five simple words create safety and presence. For example, your 9-year-old walks in from school, slams his backpack down. You step closer and say, I'm right here with you instead of, you're fine.

Say, I can see this is hard for you. Now this works because it validates their experience in the moment without trying to fix it. An example might be your 12-year-old is sobbing after a basketball loss. You kneel beside them and say, I can see this is hard on you, and I'm right here with you. Instead of stop crying, you can say, you can cry.

I'll help you through this. This works because it gives our kids permission for emotional release, which we all need from time to time. An example of this might be your teenager failed a test they studied for. Instead of jumping to solutions, you can say, you can cry and I'll be right here with you.

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Instead of, that's enough. You can say, let's take a break, or Let's take a break and check in with your body. Let's check in with your feelings. I. And this works because it builds emotional awareness without shame. An example is your between is pacing the kitchen voice rising, and you offer this as a reset button, not a punishment.

When they're upset about being left out of a camping trip with their friend group, instead of you're overreacting, you can say, this feels like a lot right now. Let's work through this together. This works because it acknowledges intensity. Without judgment and oftentimes in our childhood, things feel like a lot right now.

An example might be your child panics before a social event. And these words ground them in your support. Picture this, your child is storing their backpack, yelling about a spelling test and homework, and all you want is a quiet dinner. You're to crossroads. You could say Enough, calm down. Or you could breathe, get close with a soft voice and say, I know this feels like a lot right now.

I'm here. We'll figure this out together. Feel the difference. One shuts down while one opens up. One creates dismissal while one creates safety. So back to our family role about not saying calm down. To be honest with you, it started as a parenting strategy. Because it wasn't helpful to myself or my son.

But the great thing is over time, it's evolved into something deeper. It's evolved into a mutual agreement to honor each other's emotions. And I'll be honest with you, I've had moments where my son's called me on it is recently is in the last six months where he said, mom, remember we don't say calm down to each other.

And you know what? He's right. And I appreciate it because it keeps me accountable. It creates safety instead of dismissal. And it reminds me that emotional safety isn't a one-way street. It's a relationship. Now here's the thing, changing our language patterns take time. And your child might be surprised by your new approach thrown off if your first attempts don't seem to help.

Here's what I want you to remember. Consistency matters more than perfection. The first time I reminded Malcolm, we don't say calm down. It didn't go perfectly, but we kept doing it, both of us, and we moved it out of our vocabulary and our

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strategy. Consistency matters more than perfection. I also want you to remember that your calm presence is working even when you can't see immediate results.

And each supportive interaction builds trust even if that particular meltdown continues. Because I want you to remember we're playing the long game here. We're not just managing a moment. We're building emotional intelligence that will serve our kids for their lifetime. We're valuing the relationship over the behavior in the moment, and that builds connection and emotional safety.

Yeah. Okay. I know you're busy and probably overwhelmed sometimes, so Although I like to give homework. I also like to keep it super simple. So this week I want you to just pick one phrase from today's episode that resonates with you that you might have said before, or that you hear yourself saying often just one, and write it on a sticky note where you'll see it.

You can go to my Instagram page, the Space, peaceful Space Parent, and we'll have a carousel of the five phrases there for you so you can even screenshot your favorite one. So write it on a sticky note, screenshot it, put it in the notes section of your phone. Just pick one, and then try once this week using the one you picked during a calm moment first, if possible.

Because remember, practice makes progress and I want you to note what happens in your body when you choose connection over correction, when you choose safety over dismissal. Notice if you feel more open. Notice if your kid reacts in a more open way. And lastly, how does it feel to respond this way? Does it feel like you're offering support?

I bet you'll find that it does. You are your child's emotional anchor. Your words are powerful. They can shut down or open your kids up. They can silence or soothe. They can create shame or they can shape I. As Peggy O'Meara beautifully said a long time ago, our outer voice becomes their inner voice. Let your outer voice be the one that your child will one day carry inside and hear with love.

And if you want help practicing this, if you want tools and scripts and coaching and support from a parenting expert who gets it while surrounded by a community

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who supports you, then I want you to come join us inside the hive. The hive is where I help parents like you learn exactly how to connect instead of correct.

How to regulate before you respond and how to become the calm your child needs the most. If this speaks to you in any way, come on over to the [hive coaching.com](https://hivecoaching.com) and get signed up. I promise you, you won't regret it. So I leave you today with the thought once again. Our kids don't need to be calmed down.

They need to feel safe enough to calm themselves. This is possible for your kids, for you, for your family, and I will be with you every step of the way. I promise. That's my commitment to you. I will help you learn how to deliver this. Until next time, I'm wishing you peaceful parenting. Thanks for listening to Real World Peaceful Parenting.

If you want more info on how you can transform your parenting, visit the [peaceful parent.com](https://peacefulparent.com). See you soon.