

Ep. #240: How to Stay Calm When Your Kid Is Melting Down (And So Are You)



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 to be with you here today. You know what nobody tells you about peaceful parenting, that you're gonna have moments when your child's nervous system goes haywire and your nervous system decides to join the party. Yeah, maybe it's been one of those days today, maybe you're already running on empty, and then your kid has a complete meltdown in target.

Or maybe you're at a basketball tournament, noises everywhere, unfamiliar environment, lots of whistles, long day, and your child starts melting down and suddenly you feel your own alarm bells going off too. Here's what I want you to know right from the start of today's episode. It's going to happen. Plan on it.

You're not broken. When you lose it, you're human. The goal isn't to never get dysregulated. Even, I'm sure Mr. Rogers would get dysregulated every now and then. The goal is to notice it sooner, understand it deeper, and recover with honesty and compassion. And today we're gonna dive into the real world challenge of co-regulation when both nervous systems are activated.

You and your kid. Because last week we talked about understanding your child's nervous system, but what do you do when your castle guards are sounding the alarm system too, right? It happens to all of us. I have to tell you about a moment at Target. The completely shifted how I handle my own dysregulation.

Malcolm was about eight and we were in the checkout line. Something had triggered him. I can't even remember what now. But his nervous system was activated. He was mad and I mean mad. And in that moment of pure dysregulation, he stuck his tongue out at me. I remember it like it was yesterday. Now let me be honest with you, I was mad back.

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I mean mad. I was madder than a bee being swatted at. I was embarrassed. I was shocked and mad, and every alarm bell in my system was going off. Now the old me would've let my own castle guards take over completely. I would've reacted from that place of, how dare you disrespect me like that. But you know what happened instead for one of the first times, I mean, one of the first times I caught myself.

I paused and I gave the CEO part of my brain a minute to catch up. I let my CEO brain take over. Instead of letting my castle guards hijack the moment I could feel my nervous system wanting to explode. Believe me, I wanted to explode, but the pause, that beautiful pause and respond. Rather than react, the pausing gave me a moment for the higher part of my brain, which I'm calling the CEO for it to reboot and come online.

Now, in that moment, I could feel the familiar surge of anger and embarrassment. I could feel it, but I took a breath and I paused. And then I thought, oh, his castle guards have pulled the alarm. His CEO isn't online right now. And if I let my guards take over too, we're both gonna be dysregulated. I like to say when a storming child meets the storming parent, there's going to be an explosion a hundred percent of the time.

And just this one time I didn't wanna have an explosion. So I stayed calm. We finished checking out and we walked to the car. The walk to the car regulated or helped regulate both of us. We got in the car and we drove home in silence, me regulating myself, taking deep breaths, drinking water, reminding myself that his castle guards pulled the alarm and that I didn't need to pull my alarm.

But that my CEO brain could regulate to bring his CEO brain back online. We talked about it later when we were at home and both regulated and he apologized and explained what was going on for him. And you know what's interesting? He's 21 now and he's never done that or anything like it. Again, not once that day in Target taught me something profound.

When one nervous system is dysregulated, the other one needs to stay regulated if at all possible. But that doesn't mean you don't feel the dysregulation. It means you learn to work with it instead of being hijacked by it. Now let's get real about

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something that nobody talks about enough. You're nervous to system has a memory, and when your child's behavior triggers you.

It's often because it's hitting something from your own past. Maybe your childhood, maybe disrespect, triggers you because you felt powerless as a kid. Maybe defiance activates your system because you were parentified and desperately needed control. Maybe noise and chaos send you into fight or flight because your childhood home was unpredictable in scanning the universe for safety.

Is your go-to. This isn't your fault, this is just how your nervous system works. But here's what I want you to understand. Your triggers are information, not character flaws. I used to get so dysregulated at basketball tournaments, which was really a shame because we were pretty much at them every single weekend.

The noise, the whistles of nine or 10 courts, the bouncing of the balls. The clapping and cheering, the competition, the new places to sleep, the long drives crowds of people. It was like sensory overload for my nervous system, which I was able to connect the dots and see that sensory overload was a memory from my past and always made me feel unsafe.

Then if Malcolm was struggling too, forget it. I was a mess. I'd find myself getting irritated over little things. I'd snap at him for completely quote, normal kid behavior. I'd feel this underlying anxiety that made everything feel overwhelming and urgent. Can you relate? The thing is when we're dysregulated, it's really hard to help our children regulate.

It's like trying to calm someone down while you yourself are having a panic attack. Or it's like trying to explain taxes while being chased by a bear. Your nervous system is broadcasting chaos, not safety. But here's the good news, once you understand this, you can start working with your nervous system instead of fighting against it.

Okay? Let me illustrate this in a slightly different way. You know how on airplanes, the flight attendant goes out of their way to tell you it's put on your own oxygen mask first. So you can breathe before you're helping your kid or kids. Well,

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nervous system regulation works exactly the same way. You cannot, and I repeat, cannot regulate or co-regulate or help regulate your kids' nervous system when yours is activated, when your alarm bell is going off.

But what you can do. Is learn to recognize your own alarm bells and have a plan for when they go off. So first you regulate yourself, and then and only then do you offer your kids co-regulation. So let's talk about that plan. Here are my go-to 32nd regulation techniques that I actually use every day.

Tool number one, I put my hand in my heart and I name what's true. I literally put my hand on my heart and say out loud, I'm overwhelmed. This is a lot. I wanna run away. Naming it out loud, softens the shame spiral and helps my nervous system feel seen. I'm calling out what the guards are doing and it's very helpful.

Tool number two, I call the water reset. I always, always, always have water with me. Shout out to my hydro jug and I take three sips, one after the other. It's not magic, it's biology. The cold water and the intentional swallowing helps shift my nervous system. State tool number three, box. Breathing against the wall, I'll find a wall and press my hand against it for grounding, and then do box breathing.

In for four, hold for four out for four, hold for four. The wall gives my body something solid to lean into while the breathing helps regulate my nervous system. Tool number four, the bathroom reset. Sometimes I just need to walk away, go into the restroom and splash cold water on my face. No deep spiritual meaning here, just basic nervous system biology.

Cold water activates your parasympathetic nervous system. Now the key is having these tools ready before you need them. Pick one or two and practice them during calm moments so they're available when your castle guards are sounding the alarm. Now, let's talk about what happens when you don't catch yourself in time, because that happens to all of us when you do let your castle guards take over.

And you find yourself in a full blown family nervous system activation. First, I want you to take a deep breath and remember, this is gonna happen. It's not a sign you're failing. It's a sign you're human. Let me share a story from one of our Hive members that perfectly shows what this looks like in real life.

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Let's call this mom Nicole. She had a terrible morning. She was running late, couldn't find her keys, spilled coffee on her work clothes. Can you visualize that? Her nervous system was already in fight or flight mode before her 10-year-old son even woke up. Then her son Trumps downstairs and immediately starts complaining about breakfast.

I don't want this. This is gross. You never make anything good. And that, that's when Nicole's Castle Guards took over. She snapped. Are you kidding me Right now, I'm doing the best I can. You are being ungrateful, rude, and disrespectful. Her son escalated right back with his castle guards. You're mean, I hate you, and you're the worst mom ever.

And suddenly they were both screaming, two dysregulated nervous systems, feeding off each other's chaos. Nicole felt terrible even as it was happening, but she couldn't stop herself. Her son was now crying and she was yelling, and they were both completely in fight or flight mode. Because of the work that she had been doing in the hive, Nicole finally realized what was happening.

She stopped mid-sentence and said, wow, we're both having a really hard time right now. I need to take a break. So she went to her room for five minutes. She took some deep breaths and she splashed water, cold water on her face. When she came back, her son was still upset but not screaming, and she said, I'm sorry, I yelled at you.

I was already feeling overwhelmed this morning, and when you were upset about breakfast, my feelings got too big and that wasn't fair to you. They ended up problem solving the breakfast issue together, and he even helped her find her keys. But the real win, her son learned that when people get dysregulated, they can repair and connect.

Yeah. Okay. Here's my roadmap for when you're both dysregulated. You and your kid or kids, step one, recognize what's happening. The moment you realize you're both activated, pause and think. Two nervous systems are in alarm mode right now. We need to separate and regulate before we reconnect. Step two, create physical space.

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Say something like we're both having a hard time right now. I need a few minutes to calm down and then we can figure this out. Then actually take that space. You might need to also reassure your kid that you're gonna come right back, that you're not abandoning them. You're just taking a minute to gather yourself and you'll be right back.

Step three, regulate yourself first. Use whatever tools work for you. Take deep breaths. Drink three sips of water out of your Stanley or hydro jug. Splash cold water in your face. Do whatever you need to do to get your nervous system back online. And then step four, repair and reconnect. Once you're both calmer, this is where the magic happens.

You get to model accountability and emotional intelligence. Here's my favorite repair script. I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you. I was overwhelmed and I let my anger come out in a way that wasn't okay. It's not your fault and you didn't deserve that. I'm working on doing better next time, and I love you very much.

You are not just fixing the moment you're teaching your kid that relationships can survive conflict. The people can take responsibility for their actions and that your kids are worthy of apologies even when they dysregulate. Here's what I've learned. Regulation is not a one-time event. It's cumulative the work you do.

When things are calm makes all the difference when things get chaotic. So I like to recommend a morning check-in for a couple minutes before the day gets crazy. Ask yourself, what's already on fire in my mind today? What do I need to do? This gives your nervous system a chance to prepare instead of just reacting all day.

You might even ask, what could I do to calm myself right now? You can also add in movement you actually enjoy. I'm not talking about punishment exercise. I'm talking about movement that feels good. Dance in the kitchen. Take a walk, do five minute yoga movement, metabolizes stress hormones. You can build boundaries from overstimulation.

This is huge. Take a 10 minute tech break. Tell your kids I'm taking five minutes. I'll be right back. You're not just taking care of yourself, you're showing them how to take care of themselves. Next, know your specific triggers. Common ones I see

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are backtalk that we interpret as disrespect being ignored or defied noise and chaos.

Sibling fighting resistance to homework. Spend some time really analyzing so that you know what activates your system and then develop a plan for it. Let me tell you about another moment from those handwritten notes. I keep. Malcolm had gotten in trouble at school for something and I could see he was upset when he came home.

The old me might've jumped straight into lecture mode or gotten swept up in his emotions because getting in trouble at school is definitely one of my triggers. But I had learned to recognize when my own nervous system. Had the potential to get activated. And on this particular day, I felt that familiar surge of anxiety and that urge to fix everything immediately, or the urge to get frustrated with him, especially when something had gone wrong at school.

So we were standing in the kitchen and he was getting ready to tell me what happened at school, and I felt that surge of anxiety and frustration. So I literally told him, before you launch into the story, I need to run to the car and get something. Then I walked to the car. It took maybe two minutes, but that walk brought me back to my higher brain.

It brought my CEO back online, and it gave me time to think and regulate myself. I also grabbed my water bottle so that I could sip water while he was telling me the story. When I came back, instead of reacting from my dysregulation, I was able to have a real conversation with him and my CEO brain was able to encourage him to get in his CEO brain so that we could really listen to each other and have a connected conversation about what had happened at school.

We talked about values and respect, and we problem solved together. Which led to this beautiful moment of connection and that moment only happened because I learned to work with my nervous system instead of being hijacked by it. Okay? I have two pieces of homework for you this week that are going to be game changers.

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Homework number one, I called the regulation toolkit. Choose two of the 32nd regulation techniques that I talked about today and practice. Practice, practice them. Especially during calm moments, maybe it's hand on the heart naming how you feel. Maybe it's the water reset. Maybe it's the box breathing against the wall.

Maybe it's taking a one minute short walk. You've gotta practice this when you're not activated, when you're not dysregulated, so that these game changers are available to you when you need them. Homework number two is the trigger tracker. That's hard to say. Trigger tracker this week when you feel your nervous system getting activated, pause and ask yourself, what just triggered me right now?

What just triggered me? Was it the tone? Was it the behavior? Was it the chaos? Was it the feeling of something like being disrespected or ignored? Don't judge, just notice it. Awareness is always the first step to change. Now if you're thinking, Lisa, this sounds amazing, but I need help learning how to actually do this in my real life with my specific triggers, then I wanna invite you to join us in the hive.

In the hive. I will work with you and teach you how to recognize and regulate your own nervous system with personalized strategies created for your unique family. We'll practice these co-regulation tools together. We'll work through specific triggers that dysregulate you, and you're gonna get support from a community of parents who understand that regulation is a practice, not a perfection, because here's what I know, understanding your child's nervous system is step one, but learning to manage your nervous system, that's the real work.

That's what creates the safety your child needs to regulate too. So if this speaks to you, I want you to run, not walk, run to the [hive coaching.com](https://hivecoaching.com) and join our community of parents who are transforming their families through nervous system awareness. And as we wind down today's episode, I want you to remember you're allowed to have emotions.

You are not broken. When you lose it, you're human and your kid isn't looking for a perfect parent. They need a parent who's willing to grow, to repair, to model what it looks like to work with your nervous system instead of being hijacked by it. And every time you choose to regulate yourself first, you're teaching your kids that they're worth calming down for.

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Every time you repair, after you both melted down, you're showing them that love is bigger than our worst moments. That target moment with Malcolm, it wasn't just about staying calm in the moment, it was about building a foundation of trust. That said, even when you're dysregulated and stick your tongue out at me, I'm gonna stay safe for you.

And that foundation built moment by moment, choice by choice. That's what creates connection over a lifetime. Your regulation is your kids' safety. Your healing is their foundation, and it all starts with recognizing that it's going to happen, the dysregulation and having a plan for when it does. I want that for you and I want that for your kids.

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.