

Ep. #251: Screen Time Boundaries That Stick



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 thrilled to be with you here today. I have to tell you, when I started this podcast years ago, I never imagined we'd be here. So from the bottom of my heart, thank you for showing up, for doing the work and for choosing to parent differently.

It matters. It matters to your kids, it matters to your family, and it makes a difference in the world. So thank you and well done. Today. We're tackling something that's been showing up everywhere in my coaching calls, in our hive community, in my dms, and honestly in my house when Malcolm is younger and it's screen time.

But here's the thing, this episode isn't really about screens. It's about something much bigger. It's about your authority as a parent, your ability to lead, your willingness to hold a boundary even when your kids are upset about it. Because if you can master this with screens, you can master it with anything.

Let me paint you a picture. It's 5:00 PM on a Tuesday. Your 8-year-old has been on the iPad for the agreed upon 30 minutes. You walk into the room and say, okay, buddy, screen time's over, and immediately what's coming? You know it, right? If you've ever dealt with the iPad, you know exactly what's coming.

Just five more minutes. Five more minutes. Five more minutes. I'm almost done with this level. So you say, no, we agreed on 30 minutes time to get off, but mom, that's not fair. I just started this part. What happens next? Well, if you're like many parents, what happens next is you start explaining, justifying, defending your position.

Maybe you get upset yourself. Maybe your volume goes up and your tone changes. You've already had enough time today, too much screen time isn't good for your brain. The doctor says, kids your age should only have an hour. You already had time this morning before school and after school, and now it's five o'clock.

Ep. #251: Screen Time Boundaries That Stick

Your child interrupts, but Tommy gets to play for two hours and Sarah's mom lets her have the iPad at the dinner table. Well, now you're in full debate about fairness and what other families do, and whether this particular game counts as educational and should get bonus time, and it keeps going on and on and on, back and forth like a tennis match.

15 minutes later, you're angry, frustrated, and exhausted. You've repeated yourself six times. Your voice is getting louder and louder and you finally snap. I said, no. Give me that iPad right now. You either take the device or your kid slams it in your hand or throws it on the couch and storms off crying.

You kids crying, you feel terrible, and tomorrow you might even give in just to avoid this battle that happened today. Sound familiar? If you're nodding right now, you're not alone. Screen time has become the most dreaded battle in many homes. The battle parents avoid because, let's be honest, we're terrified of the pushback.

And here's what's wild. The research from 2025 shows that screens social media and online safety are the number one concern for parents right now. 75% of parents surveyed cite this as their top worry, yet most of us. Are negotiating with our kids about screen time, like we're equals at a bargaining table.

Let me tell you what's really important in that moment, that example that I gave you, you're trying to prove that you're in charge instead of just being in charge. And there's a huge difference when you're trying to prove you're in charge. You overexplain your reasoning, defend your decisions. Try to convince your child that the limit is fair.

You're trying to get your kids to agree with you, and you feel like you have to justify your authority. Yeah, but here's the truth bomb I want to drop today. You don't need your kids' permission to be the parent. Let me say that again. You don't need your kid's permission to be the parent. Your 8-year-old doesn't have to agree that 30 minutes is enough screen time.

Your 12-year-old doesn't have to think your rules are fair. Your 16-year-old doesn't have to like your boundaries that everybody puts their phone away at 10 o'clock at night and goes to bed all night without a phone in the room. They just have to follow them Now before anyone panics and thinks I'm saying, because I said, so parenting is back, stay with me.

Ep. #251: Screen Time Boundaries That Stick

That is not what I'm teaching. What I'm teaching is calm, confident leadership, the kind that doesn't need to yell, that doesn't need to threaten, and doesn't need endless explanations. Just clear, kind, consistent boundaries. Let me get real with you for a moment about why I think screen time is so hard to parent around.

There are actually three big reasons parents struggle with this particular boundary more than almost any other reason, number one. We're asking our kids to do something their brains literally cannot do. Now, listen to this closely because it's so important. Children. Kids with underdeveloped brains, and we know those happen.

We know the brain doesn't get fully developed till 25. Kids cannot self-regulate screen time. And I'm not just talking about toddlers. I mean teenagers too. Here's why. The part of the brain responsible for impulse control planning and saying, okay, that's enough. The prefrontal cortex isn't fully developed until 25 25.

So when you hand your 7-year-old an iPad and expect them to turn it off after 30 minutes, you're asking their underdeveloped brain to override one of the most addictive dopamine delivery systems ever created. When you tell your 14-year-old to just manage their own screen time responsibly, you're setting them up to fail.

These devices are literally designed by teams, thousands of engineers whose entire job is to make them impossible to put down the infinite scroll, the notifications, the unlimited gaming, the just one more structure of games and video games. We're asking our underdeveloped prefrontal cortex kids to fight a billion dollar industry with a brain that's still under construction and they can't do it.

Reason number two, we're terrified of their reaction. Be honest. How many times have you let screen time go longer than you wanted to because you just didn't have the energy for the fight? Yeah. How many times have you negotiated. Given five more minutes repeatedly, or just walked away because the pushback felt too hard.

I get it. I've been there when Malcolm was younger. There were days when I let him up extra screen time just to get in a little bit of rest or to get one more thing done, or maybe I didn't wanna deal with the meltdown, or I didn't wanna be the mean mom. I wanted peace. But here's what I learned, the fear of their reaction.

It's what keeps us trapped in the negotiation cycle. We start explaining and justifying because we're trying to prevent the upset. We're trying to get them to

Ep. #251: Screen Time Boundaries That Stick

agree and not be mad at us. But think about it this way. When did your child's agreement become a requirement for your parenting? Probably not around bedtime or vegetables, or going to school or putting a coat on.

Right. When did our kids' agreement become a requirement for parenting? And reason number three, many of us confuse kind with permissive. Many of us came from homes where the boundaries were harsh, where no came with no questions asked, delivered with yelling, threats or punishments. And now as parents, we're trying so hard to do it differently.

I mean, that's one of the many things that unite us here at real world peaceful parenting. We wanna do it differently. We wanna be warm, understanding, respectful, and somehow we've gotten confused and we think that being kind means we can't be firm. The respecting our kids' feelings means we can't hold boundaries.

They don't like the peaceful parenting means avoiding all conflict. But here's the truth, you can be kind and clear. You can be understanding and firm. In fact, that's exactly what peaceful parenting is. It's not permissiveness. It's calm, confident leadership. Alright, let's talk about how to actually handle screen time in a way that works, in a way that doesn't leave you drained and guilty.

Remember, this isn't about being harsh, it's about being clear. Recently I posted something on Instagram at the Peaceful Parent. They really resonated with people, and let me share it with you. It's not your job to prove you're in charge. That back and forth tug of war where you're explaining, justifying and repeating, you don't have to do that.

You're the parent. Your calm leadership is already enough. That post got a tremendous response, and I think it's because as parents, we're exhausted from playing the proving game. So here's the framework for screen time or really any boundary where your kids push back. Step one, set the limit in advance and keep it simple before the device comes out or you hand it over, or they turn it on.

Be crystal clear about the expectations. You can have 30 minutes of screen time after homework is completed. Not. You can have screen time if you get your homework done and if you're good and there's time before dinner, we'll see how it goes. Not that, or just let them drift over and get on screen time.

Ep. #251: Screen Time Boundaries That Stick

We're gonna set the limit in advance and keep it clear, simple and stated. Step two, when time's up, you're gonna state it calmly, not ask. Here's where most of us mess up. We turn our boundary into a question. Okay, sweetie. It's been 30 minutes. Do you think maybe you could start wrapping up now? No. Instead, we're gonna say screen time's over.

I'm setting a timer for two minutes so you can find a stopping point. You're not asking, you're telling with kindness and respect. Step three, when they push back, and they will, especially in the beginning, acknowledge and hold. This is the magic formula. This is where everything changes. When your child says Five more minutes.

Five more minutes, that's not fair. Here's what I want you to say. I know you wanna keep playing. I know it's hard to stop when you're having fun, and screen time is over now because your time is up. Let me break down what just happened. I know you wanna keep playing is I see you, I hear you, and your feelings matter.

It's hard to stop when you're having fun. I understand this is difficult and I'm not upset at you for being upset. Screen time is over. Now the boundary stands. Your upsetness doesn't change the limit. Say the word and and not, but let me read it again. I know you wanna keep playing. I know it's so hard to stop when you're having fun and screen time is over now because the time is up, but it erases everything before it.

I know you're upset, but that's not what we're gonna say because and holds both truths. I see your feelings that you're upset because it's fun and the limit stays. So let me say it again. Step three, the magic formula. We're going to acknowledge and hold the limit when they push back consistently. Oh, I know you wanna keep playing.

It's so hard to stop when you're having fun. Screen time is over now because the time is up. And then step four, stop talking and follow through. This is where parents go awry because we keep talking, we keep explaining, we keep justifying we words. Wa wa want, wa, wa, wa, wa. And then your child argues, you're so mean.

Tommy's mom. Isn't this strict. Then we start arguing over that, well, I'm not Tommy's mom and every family has different rules, and I'm doing what I think is

Ep. #251: Screen Time Boundaries That Stick

best, and you've been on this all day and study blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Don't just stop talking, just stop. You've already stated the limit. The argument doesn't require a response.

I like to say, you don't have to join every argument you're invited to by your kids. You can simply say, I'm not going to keep discussing this. Hand me the iPad please. And if they don't hand it over. You can calmly take it. No anger, no lecture, just done. If you do this consistently over and over and over again, this will get easier.

Once you're holding the limit, the first couple times it may be difficult because in the past you've been all over the place and they don't know what to expect. And then step five, you're gonna stay regulated while they storm. And this. My friends is the hardest part. It's hard. I get it. It's hard because they're upset, they're angry.

They might cry, they might yell. You're the worst parent ever. They might stomp to the room and slam the door, and you have to let them be upset without fixing it, without explaining, without lecturing, without giving in, without demanding that they have different feelings. Your only job at this point. Is to stay calm and be the steady one.

You can even say, I see you're upset and it's okay to be disappointed or mad or frustrated, and I'm here to talk when you're ready if you want to, and then you let it be. Lemme tell you about a mom in our Hive community. We'll call her Debra. She has a 10-year-old son who is gaming for hours a day. She'd set the limits, but then negotiate them away.

When things got tough, when he pushed back, the battles were destroying their evenings. She felt like she was swinging between dominant parenting, being a nag and permissive parenting by turning a blind eye. After working together, here's what changed. Deborah sat down with her son on a Sunday afternoon, not in the heat of the battle, but on a Sunday afternoon when they were both calm and having a snack together, and she said starting tomorrow.

Game time is from five to 6:00 PM on school nights. That's one hour. On weekends, you can have two hours on Saturday and Sunday. She didn't ask his opinion. She didn't say, how does that sound? She stated it clearly. In fact, she

Ep. #251: Screen Time Boundaries That Stick

wrote it out and taped it through the refrigerator and my recommendation and her 10-year-old son immediately started pushing back.

That's not fair. I hate this role. It's stupid. All my friends play way more than that. Mom, Debra said, I know you want more time. This is what we're doing. That's it. No explanation, no quoting studies, no defensiveness, no lecturing. I know you want more time, and this is what we're doing now. Debra reported the first few days were hard.

He tested the boundary every single day. He got mad. He argued. He tried the just five more minutes routine. One day he slammed the iPad in her hand another day, slammed the door ped in his room for quite a long time. But Debra held firm every time she said the same thing. I know you wanna keep playing and game time is over.

Now, sometimes she had to physically take the controller. One time she had turned the router off. He stormed off angry. But Debra stayed calm. She didn't punish him for being upset. She didn't give in. She just led with calmness. And you know what happened? Within two weeks, the battle stopped, not because he suddenly thought the limit was fair.

He would've still liked more time and probably thought it was unfair. But because her 10-year-old son learned that his mom meant what she said, and the arguing didn't change the outcome. He could be upset and the limit would still stand. And you know what else happened? Debra told me that their relationship actually improved because she wasn't stressed out before approaching him and then exhausted and resentful.

When he didn't comply. She wasn't yelling. She was calm and clear. And that's what happens when we stop trying to prove we're in charge and we just be in charge. With kindness, firmness, and respect. Now, I wanna go a layer deeper with you. The screen time battles, they're not really about screens, it's about your authority as a parent, your willingness to be the leader your kid needs and wants.

And I know it's scary for some of you. Maybe you grew up with authoritarian parents who led with fear and control, so you swung in the opposite direction. Toward being your child's friend instead of the parent. Or maybe you're so afraid

Ep. #251: Screen Time Boundaries That Stick

of damaging your child that you become afraid to set any limits that might upset them.

But here's what I've learned over the last 17 years as a parent coach and a mom myself. Our kids need us to lead. They're craving it when we're wishy-washy, when we negotiate everything, when we can't hold a boundary that we've set. Our kids feel unsafe because if we can't handle, they're upset. How are they supposed to trust to handle their big stuff?

And your strong-willed kid especially needs you to be stronger than their storm calm and stronger. Not louder, not harsher, just calm and steadier. They need you to stay calm when they're losing it. They need you to hold the boundary when they're pushing against it. They need you to be okay with their disappointment because that's how they learn that boundaries exist, even when they disagree that their feelings are valid, but don't control the outcome, that they can be upset and still be safe, that you're the leader and they can relax.

And here's the beautiful part. When you stop proving you're in charge and just be in charge, the battles decrease. Not because your kid suddenly agrees with all your rules. No, no ma'am. No sir. But because they learned that arguing doesn't change the outcome, so they stop wasting energy on it. They might still say, that's not fair, or I wish I could have more time.

Or Johnny gets more time in his house. But it becomes a comment, not a negotiation. And you can respond with I hear you. And move on. Now, I know some of you are thinking, Lisa, I've tried this. I've been firm, and my kid still loses it every single time. Okay, let me address that first. If you've been in negotiation pattern for a while, your child or your kid has learned that arguing works.

They've learned that if they push hard enough, you'll give in. So when you suddenly try to hold firm, they're gonna push harder at first. It's called an extinction burst in psychology. The behavior gets worse before it gets better because they're trying to figure out, what do I have to do to get the old result?

Your job, stay steady. This is temporary. And second, some kids are going to be upset about limits no matter how calmly you state them. And that's okay. It's actually healthy. Your job isn't to prevent their disappointment. Your job is to hold the boundary while they have feelings about it. Third, if you still find yourself in

Ep. #251: Screen Time Boundaries That Stick

daily battles after weeks of consistency, we might need to look at is the limit developmentally appropriate?

30 minutes might be realistic for a 6-year-old, but too restrictive for a 14-year-old. Are you following through every time or are there times you give in? Inconsistency creates more battles, not fewer. And are you staying regulated or are you getting pulled into the argument? If you're defending your decision, you're still proving instead of leading, and this is exactly the kind of troubleshooting you and I can do together in the hive, because sometimes you need support figuring out what's not working and why.

As we wrap up, I have two pieces of homework for you this week. Homework number one, the boundary audit. Take 10 minutes and think about your current screen time situation at home with your kids and ask yourself, what are my actual boundaries around screens? Are they clear or are they vague and negotiable?

When my child pushes back, what do I do? Do I explain? Do I defend? Do I give in? What would it look like to just hold the limit calmly without proving anything? Write down your observations. No judgment, just awareness. Homework number two, the practice run this week, pick one, screen time boundary and practice the framework we talked about.

State the limit clearly in advance. When time's up, state it calmly. Don't ask, acknowledge their feelings and hold the boundary. Stop talking and follow through and stay regulated while they're having their big feelings. Try it. See what happens. Notice what comes up. And if you mess up, if you find yourself explaining something for 10 minutes or giving into the battle, that's okay.

Just notice and regroup. No shame. Just keep working at this. For most of us, this takes some effort and some time and some practice and some growth ourselves. If you're thinking, this sounds great in theory, but I need help with this kind of thing in my real life, then I wanna invite you to come join us inside the hive.

In the hive, I teach parents how to hold boundaries around screen time and everything else with calm confidence, even when your kid is storming, negotiating, or telling, you're the worst parent ever with personalized strategies created just for you. Inside the hive, you and I will practice the exact phrases to use.

Ep. #251: Screen Time Boundaries That Stick

We'll troubleshoot what to do when it doesn't work, and we'll work through your specific triggers and patterns. You get three opportunities live every week to come and work with me. You get on-demand trainings for every common struggle, including an entire workshop on screen time battles, and you get a community of parents who get it and are doing the work right alongside you.

And you get the support to become the calm, confident leader your kids are craving. So visit the [hive coaching.com](https://hivecoaching.com) to sign up and join us. And here's what I want you to remember from today. Your authority as a parent doesn't live in your volume or your tone. It doesn't live in your ability to convince your child that your rules are fair.

Your authority lives in your calm, confidence in your ability to hold the boundary. With a steady voice and a warm heart in your willingness to be okay with your child's disappointment, you don't need to prove you're in charge. You need to be in charge, and your child won't always agree with your no, and that's perfectly okay.

In fact, it's healthy because the world is full of limits they won't agree with, and you're teaching them how to handle the disappointment with grace. So the next time. You're about to launch into explanation number seven about why screen time is over. Pause. Take a deep breath and hold the limit. I know you're having fun and you want more screen time and screen time is over now.

That's it. That's leadership and your kid. They're gonna be okay. Better than okay actually, because they're learning to trust that you mean what you say and that you can handle their big feelings and that you're the steady one. That's the gift you're giving them. 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.