

# Ep. #254: The Holiday Meltdown Survival Guide (Before It's Too Late)



**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. I wanna begin today by asking you a question. Has the emotional temperature in your home been creeping up lately? Maybe your kids are getting a little more reactive, less cooperative, more on edge. Yeah. Maybe you're already bracing yourself for what's coming, the school holiday break, the family gatherings, the sugar fueled chaos of the holidays.

Maybe you've caught yourself thinking what's going on with my kids? If that's you, I want you to take a deep breath right now and know that you are not alone, and today's episode is for you. Today we're gonna decode what's really going on underneath your child's big behavior. During the upcoming holidays, we're gonna talk about how meltdowns.

Up this time of the year and what a child is actually trying to communicate and how you can respond in a way that creates connection instead of chaos. Because here's what I know with a hundred percent certainty, your kid or kids aren't trying to ruin Thanksgiving. They're not trying to embarrass you at grandma's house.

They're not trying to run. Kwanza, Hanukkah or Christmas, and they're definitely not trying to be ungrateful or defiant. They are trying to tell you something, and by the end of this episode, you're going to know exactly how to decode that message. Let's be real for a moment. For many of us, the holidays are pressure cooker your routine out the window, your kids overstimulated.

Over tired and possibly bored all at the same time. And you, you're juggling shopping lists, school concerts, travel plans, meal prep, and maybe some complicated family dynamics. Not to mention the regular chores like laundry and prepping meals. It's a lot for everyone, but here's what we sometimes forget.

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Our kids are feeling all of it too. They're feeling a far less ability to regulate than we have as adults. They may not have the words to say, dad, I'm feeling anxious about seeing relatives that I don't really know, or Mom, I'm overwhelmed by all the decorations and the people and the noise. So instead, they melt, meltdown, they fight.

They demand to have their way. When they're playing with their cousins, they refuse to get dressed. They snap at their sibling over nothing. They scream, I hate you because you gave them the wrong cup. It's not logical, but it is emotional. And here's what I want you to hear. It's communication. Your child isn't trying to ruin the holidays.

They're trying to tell you something. Now let me paint a picture of what I call the invisible load or the invisible backpack that kids carry during the holidays because I really believe this is something. We don't talk about enough. I want you to just take a minute and really think about what we're asking of our kids during this season.

We're asking them to be good at Grandma's to share their toys with visiting cousins. They barely know. We're asking them to sit through long dinners with people they rarely see eating food they may not have tried before or even like. While staring at a table full of desserts they can't have until quote later, which is really some unknown time in the future.

We're asking our kids to smile for family photos when they're exhausted and have on itchy tight clothes. We're asking them to navigate new routines at strange times in strange places, and we're asking them to do all this with people yelling at the tv, maybe at football. Laughter cackling nonstop. We've all got one of those relatives conversations happening at full volume across the room, and sensory input coming from every direction with nowhere to escape.

We're asking our kids to show off what they learned at school, to be entertaining, to be nice, to be the bigger person, to be grateful, to be helpful, to be flexible, to be on all the time. Here's the kicker. We're asking them to do all this while their entire routine has been completely disrupted. No regular bedtime, no predictable schedule.

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No safe, quiet space to decompress. I mean, come on. That's a lot to carry even for adults, and here's what makes it even harder. Many times while your child is navigating all this overwhelm. Where are you? You're probably fully engaged with the adults who haven't seen in months. You're catching up with your favorite sister.

You're trying to help in the kitchen and or managing complicated dynamics with your in-laws or just trying to be on yourself. You're not ignoring your kids on purpose. You're not being a bad parent. You're just engage somewhere else. Managing your own stress and social demands, but from your kid's perspective.

They're safe person, the one that helps them regulate, just became unavailable right when they needed you most. So they're dealing with all that sensory overload, all those expectations and all that newness without their primary source of emotional support. No wonder why they meltdown. And here's what's really tricky about all of this.

Your child might actually be enjoying themselves. They might be laughing, playing, running around, all sweaty, stealing cookies, having what looks like a great time, and then bam, complete meltdown. And you're standing there thinking, but they were having so much fun. What just happened? Well, here's what happened.

Fun is still stimulation. Excitement is still dysregulation. Even good experiences require emotional processing and regulation. And your kid's nervous system doesn't distinguish between good stress and bad stress. It all adds up. All the transitions, all the newness, all the change in routine, even when it's fun, even when it's taxing.

And hey, if you have a strong-willed, big emotion kid, wow, let me tell you now we're really talking because these kids feel everything even more intensely. They notice the changes more. They need more autonomy, more predictability, more downtime, and more control, which the holiday season often strips away and when they don't get it, the meltdowns are louder longer and way more confusing.

When your kid falls apart after a great day at the zoo or a fun family party, it's not a lack of gratitude. It's not defiance, it's not being spoiled. It's overloaded. Your kid

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or kids have hit their capacity and the meltdown is their nervous system waving a giant red flag saying, I need help. I'm tapped out.

So here we are heading into Thanksgiving in America and or the December holidays, and maybe you're already feeling that familiar dread creeping in. Maybe you're thinking, why do they always have to act like this at family gatherings? I mean, come on. Everyone else's kids seems fine. What's wrong with mine?

Or maybe you're worried they're going to embarrass you again this year at a holiday or at a party, or at the school play, or in an event. Or maybe you're thinking, you know, I spend so much time and money making this season special, and this is how they act. Maybe you fall into the trap of replaying last year's holiday disaster in your mind.

And so you're dreading this year thinking, I simply can't do this again. And underneath all that is an even deeper quieter voice. There might be saying, you know, Lisa, I love my kids, but I don't like them during the holidays, and I feel bad for even thinking that

I get that. And I want you to hear me on this. You're not failing and your kid isn't broken. What if the behavior that shows up during the holidays, which are supposed to be a happy connecting magical time, what if the behavior that shows up the refusal to get dressed for grandmas, the meltdown at the dinner table, the SA in front of the relatives, the complete shutdown?

What if it's not defiance? What if it's not them trying to run your holiday? What if it is dysregulation? What if it's an unmet need, crying out for help? What if your kids are simply overwhelmed, drowning in all that stimulation, all those expectations, all that change, and doing the best they can with the limited emotional tools they have based on their brain development.

If you'll allow this shift in perspective to happen within you, I promise you, it changes everything when you can see behavior as communication instead of defiance. When you can get curious instead of furious. When you can scuba dive beneath the surface, instead of staying stuck at the top, this is where connection happens.

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This is where peaceful parenting begins. Even during the holidays. So today I wanna give you the exact framework that changed everything for my family and can change everything for yours too. I wanna share with you the exact tool I started using with Malcolm and continue to use with every single parent I coach in the hive.

You ready? Awesome. When your kid or kids are storming, especially during this holiday season, I want you to ask yourself three questions, and if you have to write these on your forearm in a sharpie, I'm gonna walk you through each question with real practical examples 'cause I want you to be able to use these immediately today.

Question number one, what might my kid be feeling right now that they can't say? Here's the thing about kids, especially younger ones, they don't have the emotional vocabulary that we have. They can't say, mom, I'm feeling anxious about all the social demands of this family gathering, or I'm experiencing sensory overload from all the decorations and the noise.

They can't, so instead they show you through their behavior holidays. Big events in families throughout the year, but especially this time of the year, bring up so many big emotions, right? I mean, there's excitement, anxiety, disappointment, loneliness, sensory overload, anticipation, overstimulation, exhaustion.

And most kids don't have the words for any of that. Here's something else really important to understand. Anger is almost always a mask for something deeper. Anticipation, fear, shame, sadness, feeling out of control, being overstimulated. So if your child is yelling, you're the worst ever. They might actually be scared that you're mad at them or worried they're not good enough or worried they weren't good enough this year to get the presence they really want, or feeling completely out of control and overwhelmed because their schedule stopped.

Can you see this? It's so important. So it's like the greatest gift you can give your family to see this. Let me give you a real example. Your 6-year-old refuses to get dressed to go to grandma's house. They're screaming, crying, may even be hitting you before you react. You could pause and say, what might you be feeling that you can't say?

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Maybe they're anxious about being around people they don't know. Well, maybe grandma's a little snappy and not very kind. Maybe they're bored and there's nothing really to play with at grandma's house. Maybe they remember that the last time they went, someone said something that made them feel bad or they're anticipating the day will be one giant, no, don't touch that.

Don't do that. Don't go in there. Maybe they just need more connection with you before they can face a room full of people. Could be any or many or all of those. Here's what I know. When you get curious about the feelings underneath the behavior, even if your kid can't name them to you, you just get curious.

Everything shifts. Let's move on to question number two. Question number two is what need might be going on underneath all this? Every kid in the world has the same basic needs. The truth is we all do connection, autonomy. Affection, appreciation, acceptance, belonging, safety, and significance. And during the holidays, many of these needs get pushed aside in favor of logistics and obligations and events.

So when your kids are whining or refusing to cooperate, or suddenly super clingy or melting down over seemingly nothing, ask yourself. What might they be needing right now? Maybe they need a moment of quiet after a busy overstimulating day. Maybe they need a break from the cousin that when the back is turned is not nice to them or ignores them or won't engage with them.

Maybe they need help transitioning from one activity to the other. Maybe they need to feel like they have some control over the day, or maybe they need to feel safe and connected to you. Let's go back to the example of your kid refusing to get dressed so we can hurry up and go to grandma's house. What need might be going unmet?

Could be safety. They don't feel emotionally safe. Going into uncertain situations with people they don't know autonomy. They could have zero control over their schedule, their space and their choices for the day, and it makes them feel overwhelmed. Maybe they need to fill up their connection tank with you.

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Before they can handle being around other people, and you've been busy all morning prepping side dishes, baking pies, and getting ready to go. When you can identify the unmet need, you can help them meet it even if you can't meet the need, because I don't think it's our job to meet every one of our kids' needs.

You can at least identify it and empathize it. Now, question number three. How can I meet the need without rewarding the behavior? How can I meet the need without turning into a permissive parent? How can I not give in every time they melt down is really what we're talking about here. And this is the magic question.

This is where peaceful parenting actually happens. And because, let me say, I'm not telling you to let your child do ever whatever they want. I am not saying melting down is okay, and I'm not saying melting down means you should give in to every demand. If you've been listening to me for a while, you'll know that.

I often say that you can hold boundaries and meet their needs at the same time. You can set clear expectations and create emotional safety. You can say no to the behavior and yes to the feelings. Notice there's no but in any of those sentences. There's ands no to the behavior and yes to the feelings.

This is boundaries with empathy. Think of it like a strong spine and a soft heart, and it's the sweet spot of peaceful parenting. So let's finish the example. Your child's refusing to get dressed for grandma's house. They're melting down. You've identified that they're feeling anxious and overwhelmed.

You've identified that they might need safety. Connection and maybe some autonomy. So how do we meet the need without rewarding the behavior? You might get down on their level and say, Hey, I can see you're not excited, or you're worried about going to grandma's. I understand that being around lots of people can feel overwhelming.

Yeah. That's validation. You're seeing them and then you hold the boundary. We're still gonna go to grandma's today, and then you meet the need. Here's what we can do. You can choose right now the green shirt or the red shirt, and before we go inside, we'll have some quiet time together in the car where it's just you and me.

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Or we'll walk around the block before we go in and I'll be there with you the whole time at Grandma's. And if you need a break, you can come and tap my arm three times. To let me know and we'll go find a private quiet spot together. Can you see what happened in this example, you're validating the feeling, you're holding the boundary, that we're still going and you meet the needs for autonomy, choice of shirt connection, quiet time in the car, or walk around the block and safety, letting them know that they can come to you anytime they need to throughout the day for a planned break.

That my real world peaceful parent is how you decode behavior and respond in a way that creates cooperation instead of power struggles. Let me tell you something personal that really illustrates why this framework matters so much. When Malcolm was younger, the holidays were rough. We often had to travel to see family.

Dave and I were often working year end type of projects at work, trying so hard. To give our kid everything we didn't have, and the holidays were exhausting, overscheduled, stressed and rough. There were disruptions to the routine. There were expectations, there was overstimulation, and they lit up my strong-willed, full contact sport kid, like a fireworks on 4th of July, and not in a good way, and I didn't get it.

I kept thinking to myself, what is wrong with him? Why can't I just enjoy this? Everyone else's kid rolls with the punches, and I am a little embarrassed to admit, but I'll own it. I tried everything. I tried consequences. I tried timeouts. I tried lectures. I tried bribes. I thought if I could just find the right punishment or the right reward, the right sticker chart, he would snap into shape and be the kind of kid I needed him to be during the holidays.

There's a little code in that right there. The kid I needed him to be, but here's the truth I didn't understand then, and I do now. He wasn't being defiant, he wasn't trying to ruin our holidays, and he certainly wasn't being ungrateful for all the fun things we were doing. He was being overwhelmed, dysregulated, maxed out, and really loud about it because he is a strong-willed, full contact sport kit.

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What I can see so easily now and still happens a little bit to this day, is that his nervous system was on overload and he didn't have the tools to communicate it in words, so it came out in behavior. Sometimes it would start small and I would miss it, so then it would get louder and louder and louder until it felt like a full fledged volcano losing lava out the top, and then the shift happened that I'm talking about today.

The second I stopped trying to control his behavior and started listening to what was underneath it. Honest to God, everything changed. I started asking these three questions that I gave you today over and over and over again. I started seeing his meltdowns as communication instead of defiance, I started meeting his needs for connection, autonomy, rest, and predictability, even during the chaos of the holidays.

Sometimes that meant we'd have to leave and go back to the hotel to have a rest for a few hours in the middle of the fun, or we'd have to go off on our own and play a game of Connect Four or cards while everyone else was doing something else. But the holidays got so much better, not perfect. We're talking about real life here, not a Hallmark movie, but so much more peaceful and so much more connection.

I started seeing his behavior as communication, and over the years, this has transformed our entire relationship, not just during the holidays, but all year long. And ironically, as I record this podcast episode today, he called me from college and he was storming, and I realized that he was trying to communicate to me that he needs some support.

He needed some help in a couple areas that he needed some connection and autonomy and rest. And after years and years and years of practice, I immediately saw the phone call as a communication tool, a request for support. I want this for you and your kids too. Now, before we move into practical takeaways from today's episode, I need to say something that might be the most important part of this entire episode.

So please give me your full attention for the next portion. Your kids' holiday meltdown is not about you. Let me say that again because this is so important. Your kids' behavior during the holidays is not a reflection of your parenting. It's

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not proof that you're failing. It's not evidence that they're ungrateful, and it's not an intentional attempt to embarrass you in front of your family.

It's not when you take their behavior personally, you make it mean something about you and that causes you to lose access to your calm. When we take their behavior personally, we get defensive, we get reactive. We start thinking about what Aunt Susan is thinking about your parenting or what your mother-in-law just muttered under her breath.

When you're in that head space, you absolutely cannot be the calm, regulated presence your kid needs when you can separate their dysregulation, their storming from your worth as a parent, everything upgrades. It's like getting moved up to first class. You stay regulated. You can think clearly. You can respond instead of react.

You can be curious instead of furious. In your regulation, your ability to stay calm in their storm, that's the lifeline they need. Now, I know this is especially hard during the holidays. I mean, come on. There's so much pressure. Pressure to have the perfect family experience, pressure, to have the perfect family photo, to host the perfect meal, to get the perfect gifts, pressure to prove to everyone that your kids are good.

Pressure to live up to everyone's expectations. But here's what I want you to remember. Your job isn't to have a perfect holiday, let go of that. The greatest gift you can give your kids through the holidays is to be your kids' safe place, their anchor, their calm in the chaos, and you can't do that if you're making their behavior about you.

So when your child melts down during the holiday gathering. When they refuse to participate in the family photo, when they're rude to grandma, when they don't wanna eat the food on their plate, when they won't share the toy with their cousin, take a breath. Just just take a pause, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.

And remember, this isn't about you. This is communication from a dysregulated nervous system, and you get to respond this year. With curiosity and compassion

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instead of shame and control, you get to choose to respond with curiosity and compassion instead of shame and control. Alright, let's bring this all together.

Here's what I want you to remember. As the holidays ramp up, every behavior communicates a need. Your child isn't giving you a hard time. They're having a hard time. And they're showing you that through their behavior, 'cause they don't have the words yet. And the brain development, the meltdown is not the enemy, it's the message.

When you can get curious about what the behavior is trying to tell you, you stop fighting against your child and start working with them. I want you to remember that fun is still taxing. Just because your child is enjoying themselves doesn't mean they're not hitting capacity. Excitement, stimulation, transitions change.

Even the good stuff requires regulation. And our kids aren't experts at it yet. Heck, most of us aren't experts at it as adults, but our kids definitely aren't. 'cause they have an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex. I want you to remember that strong-willed kids feel it all more intensely. If you have a big emotion, strong-willed kid, they're going to need more downtime, more autonomy, more predictability, and more connection during the holidays.

That's not a flaw. It's their wiring. I want you to remember not to take it personally. Your child's behavior is not a reflection of your parenting. When you can separate their dysregulation from your worth, you can stay regulated, and that's what they need most. That's their lifeline. Lastly, I want you to remember boundaries with empathy is the sweet spot.

You don't have to choose between being understood or having expectations. You can validate feelings and hold boundaries. That's peaceful. Parenting instead of reacting to the surface behavior, decode what's underneath, you can scuba dive down beneath the waves to the feelings and needs instead of snorkeling at the surface with the behavior.

That's where connection happens, and that's where peace begins. If you're listening to this episode and thinking, you know, I love this and I need help doing this, or I wanna learn how to do this better, I wanna decode my kids' behavior instead of

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reacting to it. I wanna create more peace and connection as the main gift I give my family this holidays.

Then I wanna invite you to join us in the hive. Because it's inside the hive. We decode these moments together every single week. I can coach you through the holiday meltdowns, the bedtime battles, the sibling fighting, the morning chaos, and everything in between. I can help you. Yes, you go from chaos to connection using practical tools and real time support.

I will teach you exactly how to identify unmet needs, how to set boundaries of empathy, how to stay regulated when your child is dysregulated, and how to create cooperation without bribes or threat. And here's the good news. You won't do it alone. You'll join a warm judgment-free community of parents who get it.

People are on the same journey. You're on Parents who understand the peaceful parenting isn't about being perfect. It's about being present responsive. Committed to connection. If you wanna learn how to meet your child's needs without losing your cool, if you wanna decode behavior instead of just managing it, if you wanna actually enjoy the holidays with your family, then I want you to run, not walk, but run to the [hive coaching.com](https://hivecoaching.com) and join us.

I absolutely cannot wait to welcome you inside, and as we head into this holiday season, I want you to remember something. Your child isn't trying to make things difficult. They're not trying to ruin your plans or embarrass you or prove that you're a bad parent. They're trying to tell you something, and now you have the tools to listen.

Today you learned how to decode the message underneath the behavior. Today you learned how to meet their needs while still holding boundaries. Today you learned how to be their calm in the chaos, and that's what peaceful parenting looks like, not only during the holidays, but all year round. Not perfection, not picture.

Perfect Family moments and not a Hallmark movie. Just you showing up with curiosity and compassion, seeing your child, meeting their needs, creating connection even in the middle of the mess. You've got this, and I'll be with you every step of the way. Okay, until next time, I'm wishing you peaceful parenting.

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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://www.peacefulparent.com). See you soon.