

Ep. #266: Why Saying ‘Calm Down’ Backfires (And What Your Child Actually Needs)



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 excited. To be with you here today, and I wanna start today's episode with asking you something. Have you ever been told by another parent, by a family member, maybe even yourself, that your kid should be able to calm themselves down by now? Yeah.

Maybe. It sounds like. Hey, they're not a baby anymore. Or they need to learn to handle their emotions, or you can't just hold them every time they melt down. They have to figure it out. Well, if you've heard that, if you believe that, then today's episode is for you because here's what I want you to know right from the start.

That's not how it works, and the fact that your kid. At any age can't calm down on their own right now. That's not a failure, not yours and not theirs. What it is, is it's exactly how human brains are designed to develop. Now, if you've been hanging out with me for the past few episodes, you know that we've been deep in the world of setting limits with a strong spine and a soft heart.

We talked about how to set 'em clearly. You learned how to hold them through connection. You learned how to choose battles, which actually matter. And here's what I'm hearing from a lot of parents who've been practicing. Lisa, I know what to say. I have the scripts, but when my kid is falling apart, I can't get there.

I lose it too. So I hear you. And given all that feedback I've been getting. Today, I wanna turn our attention to why that happens so that you can understand it and more importantly, what to do about it. So this episode is diving into co-regulation. We haven't talked about this in quite a while. I'm gonna help you understand what it is, why it's not being permissive or spoiling your kids, and exactly how you can start.

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Co-regulating this week with your own kids. Sound good? All right, let's dig in. Let me name something out loud that so many parents are actually carrying around silently, and it's the belief that your kid should already know how to manage their big emotions. And I get it. I understand how that belief comes to be.

Maybe it's because. Someone told you this, that you look up to. Maybe you think it's because you compare your kids to other kids who seem to handle things better, or maybe you think it because frankly, you're exhausted and you desperately want your kids to be able to do this on their own. I get it. I really do.

But here's the thing, self-regulation doesn't come first. It's not something we're born with as humans. It's built from something that comes before it, and that's something is called co-regulation. So in a nutshell, if you want your kids to self-regulate when they have big emotions, they first must experience co-regulation with a calm, trusted adult.

So let's dig into this a little deeper. Co-regulation by definition, is when a calm regulated adult helps a dysregulated kid find their way back to calm. It's not a fancy technique. It's not something you learn from a book. It's actually one of the most natural things humans do. Think of it this way.

Learning to self-regulate is kind of like learning to ride a bike. Nobody just hops on and goes, someone has to hold the back of the seat first. Dozens and dozens of times, maybe hundreds. The kid wobbles, they fall, they get back up and slowly over time they start to balance on their own. Co-regulation is you holding the seat.

Here's what the research tells us, decades of it. Actually, kids' nervous systems cannot learn to calm down in isolation. Feel like I need to say that again. Your kids' nervous system is not going to learn to calm down in isolation. They learn it through relationship. They learn it through repeated experiences of being soothed.

Offered co-regulation by a safe adult before the brain can self-soothe. It has to experience being soothed. Let me say that again. Before the brain can self-soothe, it has to experience being soothed. So when someone tells you, your child, your kid should be able to calm down by now. What they're really saying is.

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Your kid should be able to do something their brain literally isn't designed to do yet without your help. And I'm here to say that's not fair to you and it's not fair to your kid. Think about the last time you were really upset, like really upset over something like truly overwhelmed. It happened to me right after Christmas when I was trying to return something in a store.

Did someone telling you to calm down actually help? Or did you need someone to just be there and offer you their regulation? Yeah, me too. And your kid is no different. I like to say in the history of mankind, no one is ever calmed down by being told to calm down. Yeah. Okay. So now you know the definition of co-regulation.

Let's actually look at it in real life because there's knowing it and there's applying it, and I wanna help you actually apply it. I think a lot of parents hear this concept and they picture something really complicated. Like there's a specific thing they're supposed to do, a magic formula or a script.

Here's the beautiful secret. Your calm presence is the tool. That's it. That's the whole thing. Your calm presence. When you are regulated, even just a little, your nervous system sends out signals of safety, like a beacon and your kid's nervous system picks up the beacon, the signal. It's like your calm becomes contagious.

Let me also be really clear about something because I know this is where a lot of parents get nervous. Co-regulation is not giving in. It's not removing the boundary and it's not letting your kid win. You can hold every single boundary you set and co-regulate at the same time. In fact, that's exactly what real world peaceful parenting looks like in action.

Let me tell you about a moment with Malcolm that really showed me this. Malcolm was going through a stretch. I think he was about seven or eight, where bedtime was a battlefield every single night. My husband was traveling a lot. I was working hard at building my business. I was exhausted, and he was struggling.

We'd get close to bedtime and he'd argue about pajamas, and he'd doddle at brushing his teeth and he'd suddenly need water or have some critical story he

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needed to tell me. That went on and on and on. You've been there. I, as the parent was exhausted. I was frustrated, and I just wanted him to go to bed.

So I could relax for a little bit before I tried to hit the bed myself with the skill of co-regulation in mind. One night I asked him to put his pajamas on and he said no. So I asked him again and being the strong-willed full contact sport he was at that age. He said, no, again, I could feel the volcano building inside me.

You know that familiar heat. Rising up through your chest. That's where my dysregulation first makes its appearance rising up as heat through my chest, but instead of exploding again with co-regulation in mind, I took a couple deep breaths and I asked him a question I'd never thought to ask before. I said, Hey, what's making this hard for you right now?

And then I paused. I offered co-regulation. There was quite a bit of silence in the room, and I just stayed steady and calm like a redwood tree, breathing in and out, and I waited. It felt like 20 minutes, but honestly it was probably 90 seconds. And then he said, I don't want the day to be over and my pajamas feel weird.

And I can't find my stuffed animal, and I'm just, I'm just having a really hard time mom. And in that moment, everything shifted. I realized he wasn't giving me a hard time. He was having a hard time. His nervous system was dysregulated. He didn't need force, he needed safety. He needed me to be calm enough to hear him.

Then offer him co-regulation instead of demanding that he regulate on his own. I didn't give in bedtime. Still happened, but I held the boundary and I held the space for what he was feeling and bedtime it began to happen without a fight, without tears, and without me yelling because I understood what was happening and I understood that his little body.

I got very dysregulated when we began the wind down for bedtime. So I showed up night after night, regulated myself before I even opened my mouth to get the pajamas on. And throughout the entire process while holding the limits, I offered co-regulation. It was a total game changer in the bedtime routine and in our relationship and.

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After I put him to bed at night, I wasn't sitting around feeling guilty and bad because I lost it on him. Again, this works. You are the opportunity to offer your kids co-regulation and then they learn to self-regulate over time. I want this for you and I want this for your kids. This is the most important skill.

I think we can teach our kids over the 18 years they live at home. So let me show you what co-regulation looks like across different ages because it looks different depending on how old your kid is. So with toddlers, it might look like getting down on their level, softening your voice, a hand at their back.

Sometimes you don't even need words. Just your calm, steady presence right there with them when they're having a tough time or a meltdown with elementary age kids, it might look like sitting near them, not necessarily touching them. Some kids need physical space when they're upset, but being right there, remember I said earlier in the podcast?

Humans don't learn to regulate in isolation, so it might just be being right there with them available and not trying to fix it. Or overtalk, which we talked about in plenty of previous episodes, just your calm presence, sending your signal off to them that you're regulated and they're to offer them co-regulation with tweens and teens.

Sometimes it's simple as just being in the same room with them, a hand on the shoulder. I'm here, offering them a glass of water, acknowledging that what they're going through at the moment is really a struggle for them, or just staying nearby while they ride out the storm. The specifics change as they grow older, but the principle doesn't.

Your regulated presence is what teaches their nervous system, how to find the calm first with you, and then eventually on their own. Yeah, hopefully light bulbs are going off for you, or you already know this. I'm just giving you a new way to see it and reinforcing what you're already doing. So now you're probably thinking.

Great, Lisa, so I just need to stay calm when my kid is falling apart. Yeah, no big deal. Yeah, I know, I know. Here's the honest truth. When your child is dysregulated, your nervous system wants to join their party. It's biology. Two

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nervous systems in the same room affect each other. When your kid is in full meltdown mode, crying, screaming, throwing things.

Your alarm bells are going off too. That doesn't make you a bad parent. That makes you human. I get it. This takes practice and commitment and building your own neuropathways to offer your kid co-regulation. So let me show you what this looks like in action. There's a mom in the hive, we'll call her Sarah.

Sarah has a spirited 6-year-old named Nolan. One day Nolan came home from school. And completely lost it because they were out of his favorite afterschool snack. We're talking screaming tears, fist clenched, the whole meltdown, shebang. And Sarah told me, Lisa, I wanted to snap at him. Everything in me wanted to say, it's just a snack.

For God's sakes, calm down. But remember, Sarah's in the hive and we talk about this every single call in the hive. So she resisted the urge to do the old thing, the snapping, the demanding that he calmed down because, come on, it's just a snack. So instead, Sarah took a deep breath. She took a couple, she waited until she felt the slightest bit calm, and she got down in his level.

She looked him in the eye and she said, oh, buddy, you really wanted that snack, didn't you? Oh, bummer. And I'm right here with you while you work through it. Here's what happened next. No one paused for the first time ever. He actually paused. His body softened, and he crawled into Sarah's lap and sobbed for a few minutes, and then, then they talked about his day.

It turns out his teacher had corrected him in front of the whole class. And he was embarrassed and he'd been holding all those big feelings in all day long. The snack wasn't even the real issue. It was just where the dam broke. What Sarah gave him wasn't a solution to the snack problem. First, she gave him her own regulation, then she gave him co-regulation.

She sent a signal to his nervous system that it was safe for him. To feel his feelings safe to let it all out. Safe to work through all that cortisol, and then the permission to feel all the feelings and talk about what had happened during his day that my friend, that's co-regulation doing its work in real time.

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But here's what I really want you to hear in this story. Sarah almost didn't get there. Her nervous system was activated too. It wanted to join in his dysregulation. It wanted to join in because she had a lot going on in her day as well. Her nervous system wanted to join his meltdown party. She had to make a conscious choice to stay regulated, and she did not perfectly, not effortlessly, but she did it, and that's the work.

The reward was she offered him co-regulation and safety to share what happened and then work through his feelings. And that's the work. And I'll be real with you. There are times you're not gonna be able to do it. There are times when your kid is falling apart and your nervous system is right there with them and you lose it too.

It ha still happens to me. And I have a 21-year-old. It happens to every single parent. Dare I say, every single human. And when it does, it's okay. You repair, you come back, you try again. It's not failure, it's practice. I like to say progress, not perfection. Here's another example. I had a moment with Malcolm at Target.

I remember it like it was yesterday. He was about nine and. It was after school. We were buying poster board and he wanted something that I had said no to, maybe at the time, Pokemon cards or something like that. And he was really dysregulated. We were standing in the checkout line and after saying no to the Pokemon cards, he asked me if he could get a candy bar.

I was tempted to say yes to just give in, but we had a rule that we didn't have sugar after school. So. I enforce the limit of, no, we're not gonna get a candy bar today. And in truth, I probably could have done a better job of saying, I know you're dying to get something at the store beyond poster board, and I know you really want a candy bar, but we don't have sugar after school, therefore we're not gonna get one today.

I certainly at the time, didn't use strong spine soft heart. I probably just said no. In that moment, he stuck his tongue out at me in the checkout line, just stuck his tongue out. He had never done it before. It was the first time he'd ever done it, and I will admit I was completely embarrassed. Every alarm bell in my system went off.

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The embarrassment, the anger, the thought, how dare you? The checkout person was also looking at me like, how dare he? I could feel a meltdown coming from Malcolm in addition, or after the sticking the tongue out. But I caught myself again. I remember this like it was yesterday. I caught myself. I stayed regulated.

I made a conscious choice. I said, I'm not gonna join. His dysregulation. That sticking outta the tongue is him having big emotions that he doesn't know how to handle. He's been told no twice. He really wants something. Gifts are my kids love language, by the way. So I said again, I remember this like it was yesterday.

I said to myself while feeling embarrassed and angry, I said, I choose to stay regulated. And I took big, deep breaths because big, deep breaths help regulate the body. We finished checking out. We walked to the car in silence. We got in the car, put our seat belts on, and I took deep breaths the entire drive home.

Later, a couple hours later, we talked about all that was going on when we were both calm. Malcolm's 21 now, as I mentioned, and he's never done that again. Not once, and that one moment. Me consciously choosing calm and regulated overreaction, pause and respond rather than react has built something that's lasted years.

Not because I was perfect in that moment, but because I was present and I made the conscious to decision, even with anger and embarrassment flooding my body, I made the conscious decision. To stay regulated. Not easy, but I did it, and I do remember going to bed that night feeling incredibly proud of myself.

I want that for you. I know what that will do in the connection with your kids, and I know what it will do to raise your kids emotional intelligence. So if you're up for this and this resonates with you and you want more, here's what I want you to do this week. I promise it's simpler than you think. This week, I want you to pick one moment each day where your kid is even slightly upset.

It doesn't have to be a full on meltdown. Pick a small frustration, a minor disappointment, something small, and instead of jumping to fix it, instead of problem solving, instead of saying, calm down, just practice. Co-regulation. Sit

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near them, make eye contact. Say something simple like, I'm right here, or I can see that's hard or even nothing at all.

Just offer your presence and then notice what happens. Does their body soften? Do they take a breath? Do they move closer to you? Do they start talking about what's actually going on? Remember, you're not trying to do this perfectly. You're just noticing you're paying attention to what happens when you offer your calm instead of joining in their dysregulation.

That's it. That's the whole homework assignment this week. Yeah, you got this. I really wanna encourage you to commit to trying it once a day, every day for a week. Alright, let's bring it all together before we wrap up today. Here's the recap. First, self-regulation doesn't come first before your kid can calm themselves.

They have to experience being calmed over and over by a safe adult. That's co-regulation. It's not spoiling. It's how the nervous system is literally designed to develop. Second, your calm presence is the tool. You don't need a magic script or perfect technique. When you're regulated, even imperfectly, your child's nervous system picks up on that safety over time, they start to borrow it and eventually they build their own.

I've seen this in action with my own kid. And finally. You are gonna mess this up. Sometimes you're gonna lose your cool. You're gonna yell when you're meant to stay calm, and that's okay, because co-regulation isn't about being perfect. It's about showing up again and again and again. Every single time you choose to stay present and regulated with your kid in these hard moments, even just for a few seconds, you're building their ability to regulate.

You're building their nervous system and you're building trust between the two of you. That's the real work of peaceful parenting, not perfection progress. You're doing something incredibly important. My friends, you might not see it right away, but every time you sit with your kids in their storm, instead of running from it every time.

You choose calm over chaos. You are changing the trajectory of their entire emotional life and raising their emotional intelligence that matters. You matter.

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This work. It's worth it. I guarantee it. Okay, 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. See you soon.