

# Ep. #268: Why You Still Feel Like a Bad Parent (Even Though You're Growing)



**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 thrilled to be with you here today. Let me ask you something important. Have you ever had one of those moments where you just, you know, lose it? Maybe you yelled, maybe you threw a bottle of seltzer across the room, maybe you said something you immediately wish you could take back, and then that voice in your head kicked in.

Yeah. The one that sounds like a mean coach or a disappointed parent, it said. I should be better at this by now. I've read the books. I'm listening to Lisa's podcast. I've been working on this. Why am I still doing this? And then maybe you look at your kid and that same voice shows up for them. Why can't she just get along with her brother?

Why is homework still a battle every single the night? Other kids seem to have this figured out. Why can't mine? Well, if any of that sounds familiar. If you've ever felt like no matter how hard you're trying, you're just not getting there or reaching your goal, well then today's episode is for you because today I wanna introduce you to a concept that completely changed how I see myself as a parent and how I see my kid too.

And once you see this, you can't unsee it. And I promise you it's gonna shift something in you that's been stuck for a long time. And it's called the gap. And the gain. And the gap in the gain come from a book written by Dan Sullivan and Dr. Benjamin Hardy. And I think it might be one of the most important mindset shifts you can make as a peaceful parent.

And by the way, this isn't just parenting theory. This is backed by solid neuroscience about how your brain actually works. So let's dive in. Okay, so here's the basic idea, and I want you to really listen to this because I think it's gonna land

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hard for some of you. Most of us, and I mean parents especially, we're walking around measuring ourselves against something ideal.

We're walking around measuring ourselves against the perfect version of ourselves. You know the parent who never yells, who always has the right words, who handles every meltdown with total calm grace, while looking their absolute best, and they're having their house decorated to the nines while making homemade snacks.

And what I want you to see is that that goal or that ideal or that target is out there in the distance. Every single day we look at it, whether it's conscious or subconscious, and we measure ourselves against it. And probably every single day we feel like we're falling short. Sullivan and Hardy call that space between where you are and where you think you should be.

They call it the gap. And here's the tricky thing about the gap. You never close the gap, and here's why, because. The target or the goal or the ideal keeps moving. Here's what I mean. Let's say you start working on peaceful parenting and you stop yelling. That's your goal, right? It's a worthwhile goal, and I help you stop yelling.

Okay? So we get there. We're no longer yelling, but then suddenly you notice your tone. Oof, man, I, I've got a tone that needs some work. So now the goal becomes don't yell and don't use that sharp tone. Okay? So you and I work on your tone and we get that under control, and then you notice that you're not really listening.

When your kids talk to you, you're zoning out. So now the target moves again and becomes, don't yell, don't use a sharp tone and listen attentively and fully present. You see what's happening every time you grow the target. The goal grows too. It's like endless scrolling or like climbing a mountain and discovering there's another beautiful peak behind it.

And then another one behind that. And you know, this is the curse of growth-minded parents. The more you learn, the more you see what you're not doing yet. The barge just keeps getting higher and higher and higher, and you can work your entire life trying to reach that goal. Never get there because there doesn't exist.

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The more you learn, the more you grow, the higher you set the bar. So you could be doing genuinely transformative work with me as a parent. Maybe you sell every single day, and now it happens once a week. But if you're measuring against perfection, even that yelling once a week feels like a failure. I get it.

Lemme tell you about a mom inside the hive. Let's call her Erin. Erin joined the Hive feeling completely defeated on her first coaching call. She said, Lisa, I'm still yelling, and I really thought I'd be past this by now. And I asked her, how often were you yelling? Six months ago? And she laughed. Oh, every single day, multiple times a day.

I said, and now she goes, well, now it's maybe once, maybe twice a week maybe. Do you hear that Erin went from yelling multiple times a day to once or twice a week? That's massive transformation. That's real change, but Erin couldn't see it because she was standing in the gap staring at the ideal situation or the target.

All she could feel was how far away she still was. And here's what makes this gap concept even worse. We do the same thing with our kids. We have this picture in our heads of what they should be doing. By now, I mean, it sounds like your 2-year-old should be sleeping through the night. Your 7-year-old should be able to handle all of their big emotions.

Your teenagers should be more responsible with their schoolwork. When they're not there yet, we get frustrated, we get disappointed, and sometimes without meaning to, we let 'em know it, and that's the gap. The problem with the gap is it steals joy from everyone. Everyone. I tell you. Now, here's why this matters so much from a brain science perspective, and this is the part that really changed things for me, when you're stuck in the gap.

Your body interprets it as a threat, all that shame, all that frustration about not being good enough. Yet your system, specifically your amygdala, reads this as danger, which means you're operating from your emotional brain, your middle brain, the part of your brain that creates all of your emotions, including shame and frustration.

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And here's what we know. From science, you can't learn or change. When you're feeling shame and frustration, you can't reflect, you can't problem solve, and you can't make new choices because you're not in your higher brain, your prefrontal cortex where all of those activities happen, and on top of it, your middle brain is busy protecting you from the feeling of failure because it thinks it's saving your life.

Your middle brain is not interested in your growth. It's interested in your survival. And when you're in that shame spiral, feeling like you're not good enough, your higher brain, the part that can actually think clearly and make thoughtful decisions and sort things out, it goes offline. So when you measure yourself against an impossible target goal or idea, and you feel like you're constantly failing.

You're not just feeling bad when this is all happening. You're literally shutting down the part of your brain that could actually help you grow. And this is why the gap is so dangerous and troublesome. The gap doesn't just make you feel terrible. It keeps you stuck. The gap keeps you stuck. Okay, so what's the alternative?

Well, Sullivan and Hardy call it the gain, and it's beautifully simple. Instead of measuring forward towards the impossible, towards the moving idea, target and goal, they want you to measure backwards. Look at where you started, and measure how far you've come. And when we do this, especially in parenting and especially with our kids, the whole picture changes.

That parent who went from yelling multiple times a day to once a week, that's not a failure. That's transformation. That's the gain. When you live in that gain, you start noticing things like, oh my gosh, last month I would've completely spiraled after that argument with my kid today. I took a breath first or six months ago.

I didn't even know what repair was. Now look at me. I go back and I say to my kid, Hey, I'm sorry that wasn't okay. Let me try again. A year ago, bedtime was a screaming match every single night. And now most nights we actually connect before they fall asleep. You see, that's real progress. And when you measure from where you started, you actually feel that progress and hope comes back and the motivation comes back and continues, and you remember why you're doing this work in the first place.

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Yeah. Oh my gosh. The gain is so amazing. It's such a beautiful place to sit in because what happens neurologically when you shift from the gap to the gain, when you look at evidence of your own growth and you acknowledge how far you've come, your nervous system calms down, the shame lifts, the frustration eases, and suddenly.

Your higher brain comes back online and that part, your higher brain can actually reflect, learn, and make new choices. This is why the gain isn't just a nice mindset trick. It's literally changing your brain's ability to grow. Sullivan and Hardy lay out three big ideas in their book, and I think all three are incredibly relevant Parenting.

The first one is, as we've talked about so far, measure backwards, not forwards. Measure the gain, not the gap. They encourage you to stop comparing yourself to the ideal parent in your head. Start comparing yourself to who you were before you started this journey. That's where the real evidence of growth lives.

Second, every experience becomes a gain. When you learn from it, even the hard ones, even the nights you yelled, even the moments you're not proud of. When you look at those moments and you ask, what did I learn? What can I do differently next time nothing is wasted. And third, and this is where it really lands for exhausted parents.

The gain gives you your power back. When you tie your wellbeing to an ideal you haven't reached yet. You're basically saying, I can't feel good about myself until I reach it, or until I'm perfect. And as we know, perfect never comes. So you never feel good. But when you shifted the gain, when you look at where you were and where you are now, suddenly you have real proof, real concrete proof that you're growing and that proof, that's what keeps you going.

That's what builds hope. That's what makes this whole journey feel possible instead of impossible. Lemme tell you about a moment with Malcolm that really showed me this. He was about 14 and we were having one of those circular arguments, you know, the power struggle and you know the kind where you're both saying the same things over and over again and nobody's listening.

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And in the middle of it, I caught myself. I took a deep breath. Instead of continuing to fight, I said, Hey, I'm noticing we're stuck. Can we pause and regulate and try this again in a little bit? And Malcolm looked at me and he said, mom, three years ago you would've never done that. I'm so proud of you. And he was right.

Three years earlier, I would've kept going. I would've had to win. I would've felt like if I took a pause. Not only was I not winning, but I was losing and I would've made it worse, but this time I didn't. I noticed that I was dysregulated. I noticed that we weren't getting anywhere, and I invited myself to pause and regulate.

I needed some space to be able to regulate myself, and I asked for what I needed and he noticed. That's the gain, not perfection progress. Now here's where I wanna take this a step further because I think this is where it gets really powerful for families. What if you started measuring your kids in the gain too instead of the gap?

Think about it. So, so, so often we look at our kids and we see the gap. I'm guilty of this too. Even with a 21-year-old, we see the gap. We see the homework that's not getting done. We see the sibling fighting, we see the meltdowns. We see the messy room. We see them not being able to complete the chores exactly when we ask and we see where they're not there yet.

And oftentimes we feel this urgency to focus on the not there yet and work to get them there. But what if you flipped it? What if, instead of focusing on where they're falling short, you measured backwards and you reflected the progress back to them. Here's what happens when you do that. First, you're giving your kids evidence of their own growth evidence they probably can't see for themselves yet, and that evidence, it builds hope.

It builds confidence. It builds their belief that they're going to get where you and they want them to be. But second, and this is the part that really matters. When you reflect the gain back to your kids, you're helping their nervous system stay regulated. You're offering co-regulation. You're helping their higher brain stay online and.

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When a kid hears nothing but what they're doing wrong, what they're not yet what they need to fix, their nervous system begins to interpret all of that language as a threat, and shame kicks in and frustration kicks in, and then their emotional brain, their middle brain takes over and they can't learn and they can't change, and they just feel bad.

And they're stuck in a cycle, a never ending loop. But when you, the parent point out what's emerging, when you show them evidence of their own progress, their nervous system regulates, the amygdala stands down, the shame lifts, and suddenly they can actually hear you. They can reflect and they can keep trying.

Lemme give you some really concrete examples of what this looks like across different ages. Let's say your toddler is learning to share. Six months ago, she would've screamed and grabbed toys from other kids every single time, and now, I mean, she still struggles sometimes, but last week at the park, you saw her proactively hand a toy to another kid without being asked.

So the gap voice in your head would say, yeah, but Lisa, she still grabs toys. She's not there yet. Okay, I hear you, but here's what the gain voice says. I noticed you shared that toy with the little girl at the park and you didn't even need my help. That tells me you're learning how to share your toys, and that's wonderful.

That's the gain voice. Let's say you have a first or second grader who's working on reading. He's still below grade level and he gets frustrated easily. But six months ago, he couldn't even recognize half the letters, and now he's sounding out simple words. So the gap would say, oh my gosh, he's behind. He should be reading chapter books by now.

My neighbor down the street says her second grader is consuming two books a week. Okay, I hear that. But here's what the gain voice would say to your kid. Sweetheart. I remember at the beginning of the year when you didn't even know what the CH sound made, and now look at you. You just read that whole sentence by yourself.

Your brain is growing so fast, it's amazing. That's the gain voice. Now, let's say you have a third grader that's working on managing big emotions and she still has

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meltdowns. In your mind quite a bit. But a year ago, those meltdowns would last an hour each, and now they're down to 15 minutes. And sometimes she's even starting to catch herself before she explodes.

So the gap would say something like, well, she still melts down. Why isn't this working? But the game voice says to her, I noticed that when you got upset about your homework, you walked around and took some deep breaths. Do you realize that a year ago that would've turned into a huge meltdown? Look at how much progress and growth you've made.

I guarantee when we hear this from our parents, it feels amazing. Amazing. Maybe you have a middle schooler struggling with friendship, drama. She's anxious, she's unsure of herself, but last year she would've shut down completely and refused to talk about it, and now she's actually coming to you. And asking for help.

So the gap voice might say, oh my gosh, she's so anxious. She should be more confident. By now, she should have solved these friendship problems. That's the gap, the ugly gap voice. Here's what the gain voice says to your daughter. Wow. I am really proud of you that you can come and talk to me about what's happening with your friends.

Last year, you would've held it all in to yourself. This shows me that you trust yourself to handle hard things and you trust me to help you, and I'm so glad we're doing this together. I mean, come on. What? Teenager with friendship drama doesn't wanna hear that. Right? All right. Let's talk about the high schooler.

Let's say your high schooler's learning responsibility. He's learning, but he still forgets things and he procrastinates. Now, last semester he was missing 25% of his assignments and you were constantly getting emails from teachers. This semester, he's got everything turned in. Now granted sometimes it's late and sometimes it's last minute, but he's doing it so that ugly gap voice says to you, he's still barely passing, and he should have straight A's.

Now, here's what the gain voice can say to this teenager. I know high school still feels hard, but if we look back at the beginning of the year, you were missing a ton of assignments and now you're getting every assignment done. Maybe not early,

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but you're getting it done. And that's real growth. And it tells me that you're figuring out how to manage yourself and I could not be more proud.

And together we'll keep growing. And my last example is. Preparing for college. Let's say you have a teenager that's preparing for college and like many teenagers today, he's stressed and overwhelmed, but two years ago he couldn't even have a conversation about his future without getting dysregulated, yelling at you, and then shutting down.

Today you've got a teenager who's making plans and asking questions and starting to take ownership of his future. That ugly gap voice says, oh my gosh, he's so stressed. I'm so stressed. He should have this all figured out by now. We're totally behind. We're never gonna figure this out. And here's what the gain voice might say to your teenager, to your senior in high school.

Hey, I remember when you were a sophomore and we couldn't even talk about life after high school without you losing it. And now look at you. You're researching programs, you're asking for help, and you're figuring it all out, and that takes courage. And I just want you to know that I see it and I see you, and I see the progress you've made.

So let me ask you a real world peaceful parent, do you feel the difference when you reflect the gain back to your kids? You're not ignoring the areas where they still need to grow and being, you know, positively toxic. You're not pretending everything's perfect. What you're doing is you're showing them evidence.

The growth is already happening. You're helping them see themselves as capable. You're building their resilience, their confidence, and their belief that change is actually possible, not because you told them to believe it, but because you're showing them the proof day in and day out. And just like with you as the parent.

When you help your kid's nervous system stay regulated by pointing out what's working instead of what's broken, you're bringing their higher brain online. You're creating the exact conditions they need in order to keep learning and growing. Yeah. Awesome. Okay, so here's what I want you to do this week, and I promise it's simple.

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This week. I want you to pay attention to that voice in your head. The one that says, I should be better at this by now. The one that compares you to the ideal, to the target, to the goal. Next time you hear that voice, I want you to pause just for a second, and I want you to name it. I'm in the gap right now.

That's it. You don't have to fix it. You don't have to argue with it. Just notice it and name it because that awareness alone. Allows the gap to begin to loosen its grip on you. Next, at the end of every day this week, I want you to write down three wins. Not big wins, not perfect moments, just three things where you showed up, where you chose growth and where you were in the game.

It might look like, Hey, I paused before I yelled. I still yelled, but I paused or I apologized to my kid after I lost it, or. I felt myself at a fork in the road during bedtime, and I chose to stay calm even though I wanted to go ham on my kit. Sullivan and Hardy actually recommend this as a daily practice, and I'm telling you over time this changes everything because you start to see the evidence, you start to feel the progress, and then suddenly you're not measuring yourself against impossible anymore.

You're measuring yourself against real. It's a game changer, I tell you. Now, let's bring our kids into the homework assignment this week. This week, pick one moment where you notice your kid is making progress, even if it's the itsy bitty teeniest, bit of progress in an area where they're struggling. And then I want you to tell 'em what you see.

It might sound like I noticed you cleaned up your joys the first time I asked you. That tells me you're learning to be responsible, or, I noticed you didn't hit your brother when you got angry. You used your words instead. That's real growth. Or, I know math feels really hard right now, but can you remember last month when you didn't understand fractions at all and now look at what you're doing.

Your brain is growing and figuring things out. You're not ignoring the areas where they need help. You are showing them evidence that the help and the progress is there, and that evidence, that's what keeps them going. Now, if you want a little extra credit this week in the homework assignment, and if you wanna take this

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work even deeper, and I think this could be truly transformational for your whole family, I want you to introduce the gain to your kids.

And I don't mean lecture them about it, I mean make it a practice at your dinner table. Every night, everybody at the table shares three wins for the day. And these don't have to be big wins. These can be itty bitty, teeny tiny, right? It could be something like, I remembered to put my backpack at the door, or I stayed calm once today when my brother was annoying me.

Or I ask for help in math instead of giving up. And what you're doing here is you're teaching your whole family. To measure backwards instead of, and you're showing them in real time, the growth is happening, that progress is real, and that we don't have to be perfect to be proud of ourselves. Me? Say that again.

We don't have to be perfect to be proud of ourselves. And here's what I've seen happen with families who do this. It changes the whole atmosphere and culture, not only at the dinner table, but in the family. Instead of rehashing what went wrong, instead of focusing on who got in trouble or what didn't get done, you're celebrating what did happen.

You're noticing the gain together, and then your kids start looking for their wins during the day and they start catching themselves growing, and suddenly you're not the only one measuring backwards. Your whole family is living in the gain together. That is powerful and it is extra credit because I know not every family can pull this off right away, but if you can try it even for just a week and watch what happens.

Alright, let's bring it all together today before we wrap up. First, the gap is where most parents live. We measure ourselves against an impossible idea, goal, or target that keeps moving. And we always feel like we're failing. We're never quite there. And when we're stuck in the gap, our nervous system interprets this as a threat, which shuts down the exact part of our brain that we actually need to help us grow.

Second, the gain changes everything. It's a total game changer when you measure yourself backwards instead of forward. When you look at where you started instead of where you think you should be. Suddenly you can see evidence for real

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growth. And that evidence, it calms your nervous system, brings your higher brain out back online, and gives you the motivation to keep going.

And third, when you reflect the gain back to your kids, you're not just making them feel good, you're helping their nervous system stay regulated, you're building their confidence and you're teaching them that growth is messy and it takes time. That they can trust the process because there's real evidence that it's working.

Now, I know this journey isn't easy, and I know some days it feels like we're never gonna get there, wherever there is, but I want you to hear me when I say this. The fact that you care enough to keep trying, the fact that you're listening to this right now and the fact that you are still showing up for your kids even on the hardest days, that is the gain.

You are not the same parent you were a year ago. You are not even the same parent you were last month. And your kids, they're growing too, even when it's messy, especially when it's messy. So I want you to stop measuring the distance to perfect and start measuring the distance from where you began. It's closer than you think.

I promise. 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 [peacefulparent.com](http://peacefulparent.com). See you soon.