

Ep. #274: Why Your Kid Overreacts (And What They Actually Need)



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, and I need to start today's episode with a question. Has this ever happened to you? You tell your kid no to something completely reasonable, like, no, we can't stop for ice cream today, or, no, you can't have 10 more minutes of screen time, and they absolutely lose it.

We're talking tears, screaming, maybe door slamming. You know, a reaction so big and so intense that you find yourself just standing there thinking what just happened? It was just ice cream. Or maybe it's even smaller than that. Maybe it's that you cut their toast into triangles instead of squares, or their sock has a seam in the wrong place, or their sibling looked at them weird and boom, a full.

Scale meltdown. Yeah. Yeah. And the truth is you're probably exhausted and confused and maybe a little embarrassed if it happened in public, and you start wondering what's going on? Is something wrong with my kid? Or you think, are they being manipulative or are they spoiled or. Did I do something to cause this?

Well, real world peaceful parent. I hear this all the time, and today I want to give you something really important, an explanation that isn't about blame, and three tools you can start using this week to actually change this pattern because here's the truth, your kid isn't broken. They're not manipulative.

They're not spoiled. They have what I call a narrow tolerance tank. And the good news, the really good news is that you, yes, you can help them expand it into a large tank. And that's what today's all about. So let's dive in. I wanna take you back to a moment from Malcolm's childhood. Malcolm is my son, as you know, and he's now 21.

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He's a junior in college and he is without question one of the most strong-willed humans that I've ever known. And I say that with so much love and joy and pride that strong will is a part of what makes him who he is today. But back when he was five or seven or nine, it felt a lot as his mom, a lot. So, um, I remember when Malcolm was about seven.

It was a Saturday afternoon and he had been inside most of the morning. He came bouncing into the kitchen, so excited. You know, he had that kind of energy that you can feel radiating off of them and he said, mom, mom, can I go to Will's house? Now? The timing wasn't great. We were getting ready to entertain that night, and I had things to prep and Will's house was.

A 20 minute drive. So I said very calmly, very reasonably. Not today, bud. We've got people coming over tonight and that was it. That was the full sentence. And Malcolm, he fell apart, I mean, fell apart, tears screaming. That's so unfair. He stomped down the hallway, slammed his door so hard that a picture fell off the wall.

And I stood there in my kitchen thinking what just happened? At the time, I did what most parents do. I thought he was being dramatic. I thought he needed to learn that he doesn't always get what he wants. I thought if I give in now, he'll learn this behavior works. So I held firm, but not in a real world peaceful parenting kind of way.

At the time I marched. Down the hall. I raised my voice and I started lecturing him about his, how his behavior was unacceptable. And the result was we both ended up more dysregulated and angrier than we were before he even asked the question. The visit to Will's house was forgotten. But what wasn't forgotten was the way that afternoon felt bewildered, disconnected, tense.

Both of us licking our wounds. And what I didn't understand then that I completely and deeply understand now, is that Malcolm wasn't having a character failure in that moment. He was having a capacity failure. His tolerance tank was almost empty, and my no was the thing that pushed him over the edge. I wanna introduce you to the concept that I think is going to be a total game changer for how you see your strong-willed kid or kids.

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Every single one of us, all human beings have a tolerance tank. Think of it like the fuel tank in your car, and your emotions are the gauge. When the tank is full, you've got resources you can drive all over town, go anywhere you want. You've got capacity. You can handle bumps in the road without swerving.

When someone cuts you off in traffic, you take a deep breath. When meetings run long, you adapt. When the coffee place is out of your usual order, you roll with it, right? But much like the fuel tank, when your tolerance tank is low, every single bump feels like a crisis. You snap at your partner over nothing.

You burst into tears at a commercial. The smallest inconvenience sets you off in a way that later when the tank is full, again, you can't even explain. Sound familiar. You get where I'm coming from. Now, here's where it gets really important. For our strong-willed kids. Their tolerance tank tends to be smaller by design.

You might have a 20 gallon tolerance tank, and they might only have a five gallon. This isn't a flaw. This is actually connected to how their brains are wired. Strong-willed kids have nervous systems that are often more sensitive, more reactive, more alert to change and perceived injustices. I feel like I need to say that again.

Strong-willed kids, including mine, have nervous systems that are often more sensitive, more reactive, more alert to change and perceived injustices. It's the same wiring that makes them creative and passionate and intensely curious about everything. It also means their tanks drain faster and refill more slowly, right?

Think about it. If you had a five gallon tank in your car, you'd have to fill it up much more often than my 20 gallon tank in my car. So strong-willed kids tanks drain faster. And refill more slowly. So when you see a big reaction to what seems like a small thing, what you're actually witnessing is a kid whose discomfort is just outpaced their coping skills, their tank kit, empty, and when the tank kits empty, behavior escalates every single time.

Here's what that looks like when their tolerance tank is low. Disappointment feels enormous. Not, oh, well maybe next time I can go to Wills. More like, this is the worst day of my life. No feels threatening. Not like a limit, but like a personal

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attack. Mistakes feel like failure, not, I'll try again. More like I'm terrible at everything.

Small frustrations trigger huge reactions. That wrong sock seam, that's not about the sock. That's about a tank that was already an empty, but before the sock even came into the picture. And here's what I need you to hear, because this is so important. This does not. Capital N, capital O, capital T, this does not mean your child is fragile.

Fragile means they'll break. Your strong, strong-willed kid actually is the opposite of fragile. They're actually incredibly resilient. Once they have the tools to manage what's happening inside them, a small tolerance tank doesn't mean weak, it means under-resourced. Right now, it means they haven't yet built the capacity to handle big discomfort, and that capacity can be built, that tank can be expanded, and you have a big role.

Expanding that tank from five gallons to 20. So here's where we get really practical, because I know you didn't tune in today just for the explanation. You wanna know how to expand that tank. So let me give you three tools. I call 'em, read the tank. Fill the tank, don't drain the tank. Sound good? All right.

Let's dig into tool number one. Read the tank. Before you do anything, you have to get good at reading your kid's tank level. Think of yourself as a detective. You're looking for patterns. Really get to know your kid. Ask yourself, when does my kid tend to fall apart the most? Is it right after school? Tank is often empty after a full day of holding it together?

Is it when they're hungry? When they're tired, when they're overstimulated, is it when there's a big transition back to school after break a new sibling, a change in routine summer break. Write this down. Seriously, this is your first piece of homework today. Start noticing and tracking when your kids big reactions happen.

Not to judge them, but to get ahead of the pattern. Here's the thing about strong-willed kids. Their reactions might feel random to us because we're looking at the trigger, the no, the wrong sock, the no to ice cream, the it's time to do homework.

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And we're thinking that can't possibly be the reason. And you're right, it's not the reason.

The trigger is the last straw. It's what broke the dam that was already about to break. When you start tracking, you can begin to see the patterns and when you see the patterns you can anticipate and anticipating is enormously powerful in helping you stay calm and regulated and then offering them co-regulation for Malcolm.

One of the clearest patterns I noticed once I started doing this work was that his tank was almost always lowest on Saturdays. He'd spend the whole week white knuckling it through school, staying in his seat, following the rules, managing his impulses, and by Saturday, the kid had nothing left any no, on a Saturday afternoon was basically an invitation to an explosion.

Once I understood that, I changed my approach. I made sure he got some outdoor time on Saturday morning, some movement, some connection time with me before the day got going. I was filling his tank before I asked it to run on fumes. Yeah. Tool number two, fill the tank. This is the long game. This is how you expand your kids' tolerance tank over time.

Here's what fills the tank for kids. Connection, movement, adequate sleep, predictability, what I call micro wins, and. It starts with connection first, because this one matters. Most kids who feel genuinely connected to at least one adult have more capacity for frustration. Now, this is not magic. This is neuroscience.

When a child feels seen and safe in their relationship with you, their nervous system settles and a settled nervous system can tolerate more discomfort. This is why connection before correction works. When I ask you to connect first. I'm not asking you to be a pushover. I'm asking you to fill the tank.

So there's something in there. When the hard moments come. Movement is another big one. Kids, especially strong-willed, high energy kids need to discharge the physical tension, the cortisol that builds up in their bodies. 30 minutes of running around outside does more for your kids' emotional regulation than almost anything else you can do except connection before a hard conversation, before screen time ends, before a transition.

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You know, they struggle with get them moving first, and then there's predictability. Strong-willed kids often have nervous systems that are on high alert. They're constantly scanning the universe for threats. When life feels predictable, when they know what's coming, when transitions are telegraphed ahead of time, when rules are consistent, their nervous system is able to relax, and a relaxed nervous system has a bigger tank.

Now, the transitions telegraphed ahead of time need to be age appropriate. So you don't tell a 3-year-old, we're going to Disneyland in 10 days. You might tell them that morning. You might tell your 7-year-old, we're gonna leave for soccer in an hour and begin the countdown and the reminder every 10 minutes for the hour.

Make sense? Okay, and finally, micro wins. These are small, intentional moments where your child gets to experience competence, where they do something hard and succeed. Where they feel capable. Where they feel a win. Because competence builds tolerance every time your kid navigates a hard moment, even a small one, and comes out the other side.

Okay? Their tank expands just a little bit, just a little more capacity for next time. This is not about sheltering them away from discomfort. It's about building your tolerance to discomfort gradually the same way you'd train for a long distance event like a marathon. You don't go out and start with 26 miles if you've never run before.

You start with one mile and you expand from there. And tool number three, I like to call, don't train the tank. And this is the one parents are most grateful for and most humbled by because this one is about us, you and me. If we're honest with ourselves, a lot of what we do in the moment of a big reaction actually drains the tank further.

Think about what typically happens when a kid melts down. We often, unless we're doing this work, we get louder. We repeat ourselves, we lecture, we add consequences in the moment. We remind them of other times when they've behaved badly, when forecast their future with doom, we withdraw our warmth and we go cold and distant because we're hurt or exhausted or both.

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Every single one of those responses sends one signal to your child's already overwhelmed nervous system. It sends the signal that you are not safe right now to them. And an unsafe nervous system cannot regulate. It can only react. So here's the in the moment tool when your child's tank kits empty and the big reaction comes your one job.

Is to be the calm presence in the storm at that moment. This might look like getting down on their level, speaking slowly and quietly instead of escalating. Or it might look like simply saying, I can see this feels really big right now. I'm right here. Or it might look like offering physical closeness, a hand on the shoulder if the child accepts that, or it might look like.

Being quietly present and letting the storm pass without adding fuel to it. Now let me be honest with you. If you're not in the habit of doing this, this is going to feel really weird at first. It is. There's no other way around it. You've been in a habit for a while of wanting to teach and correct and address the behavior right in the moment, and you can do all that just not right in the moment of the storm.

In the moment of the empty tank of the big reaction from your kid, your job is to co-regulate, to be the calm so they can borrow your calm. The teaching, the fixing, the educating that comes later after the storm, when the tank has some fuel back in it, that's when your child's brain can actually hear you and learn connection first, regulation second.

Teaching third every single time. I wanna share a story with you from one of our hi families. I've changed the details to protect their privacy, but this is a composite of conversations I've had with parents just like you. So let's call this mom Rachel. Rachel is a 7-year-old named Eli, and Eli was an explosion waiting to happen.

Every single day, if not every single hour. Rachel told me that she was starting to dread mornings every day something set him off. The cereal was wrong, his shirt was itchy. His sister was sitting in his spot at the table, and when Rachel joined the Hive, she was at her limit. She was exhausted and she was starting to resent her own kid.

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And she felt like the world's worst mom because of it. On our first coaching call in the Hive, the first thing she said was, I don't understand my kid. I feel like I don't know him at all. He's so unpredictable. Lisa, one of the first things we did together was help Rachel start tracking Eli's patterns, and almost immediately she saw something she hadn't noticed before.

Eli's worst mornings were always after a night where he hadn't slept well or on days when he had a transition coming, like when school started back after a break or there was something new on the calendar, and Rachel quickly realized that his tolerance tank was small and often empty. And she quickly realized that it was often drained or empty before he even got outta bed in the morning.

Rachel also realized something harder that her own reactions to his meltdowns was draining his tank. Further, the raised voice, the frustrated size and the why is everything always a thing with you, Eli. She could see for the first time how her reaction. Was feeding in to draining the tank more so Rachel started working on two things simultaneously, filling Eli's tank in the morning by giving him 10 minutes of one-on-one connection before anything else was asked of him, and working on her own response when the meltdowns came.

Now this took some recognition. She had to get up a little bit earlier in the morning and be a little bit more organized. To be able to consistently give him that 10 minutes of one-on-one connection in the morning, but she was committed to it and she made it happen. It didn't change overnight, but after about six weeks, Rachel told me something that made me tear up.

She said, Lisa, I feel like I finally understand Eli, and when I understand him, I don't get as scared by the big reactions. I am now able to see a kid with an empty tank, and I know exactly what to do. That's the hive. That's the work. That's what happens when you stop reacting to behavior and start understanding the child beneath the behavior.

All right, here's your homework, and yes, I'm gonna give you two things because I know you're ready for it. Homework number one this week. Keep a simple log. Every time your kid has a big reaction, write down three things, what time it was, what else happened that day, and what was the tank level before the trigger hit.

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Don't analyze, just write it down. Homework number two, pick one tank filler and commit to it for seven days. Just one. It might be 10 minutes of outdoor movement after school. It might be five minutes of one-on-one connection before you make any request in the morning. It might be verbalizing transitions ahead of time.

In five minutes, we're gonna turn off this show, and I know it's gonna be really hard for you and I know you can do it. Whatever you choose, commit to it for seven days and see what you notice. You don't have to transition your entire parenting approach this week. You just have to try one thing. One thing done consistently can shift the entire pattern.

Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Let's recap what we've covered today. Your strong-willed kid is not broken. They're not manipulative and they're not spoiled. They have a narrow they to tolerance tank, a very small tank. Wind discomfort outpaces their coping skills. Behavior escalates not because of bad character, but because of limited capacity.

Capacity it can be built. And we talked about three tools to help build the tank, to help it grow, to help the tank get bigger. We talked about read the tank track patterns so you can get ahead of them. Fill the tank. Connection, movement, predictability and micro winds. Expand your child's tolerance over time and don't drain the tank in the moment of a big reaction.

Be calm, co-regulate. First teach later. You are not powerless here. Your kids are not running the show. You have more influence than you know, and I wanna leave you with this. The next time your kid loses it over something that seems tiny, the wrong cereal, the wrong sock, the no that cracked the dam. I want you to take a deep breath and think this isn't a character problem, it's a capacity problem.

Capacity is something I can help build. That small shift in perspective, that changes everything. It changes you. Your parenting, your kid and your relationship, and I want that for you, and I want that for your kids. Until next time, I'm wishing you peaceful parenting. Thanks for listening to Real World Peaceful Parenting.

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If you want more info on how you can transform your parenting, visit the [peaceful parent.com](https://www.peacefulparent.com). See you soon.