

Ep. #275: You Don't Have to Attend Every Argument Your Kid Invites You To



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 fired up to be with you today. And before we dive in to today's topic, I wanna do a quick check-in. How are you doing? Like really, how are you doing? Because if you're anything like the parents I talk to every single day, there's a good chance that you're tired.

Not just physically tired though. Yes, that too. But maybe emotionally tired. The kind of tired that comes from feeling like you're in a battle with your own kid or kids every single day. Well, if that's you right now, number one, I hope you're feeling very seen. And number two, I've got some great tools for you today that I think can really make a difference.

Last week in episode 274, we talked about the tolerance tank. Why strong-willed kids seem to lose it over the smallest of things and what you can actually do to help them build more capacity. And if you haven't listened to that one yet, I want you to go back after this and listen to it, because I've gotten a lot of feedback from people that it's changing how they see their kids'.

Big reactions. Okay? But today. Today is the episode I've been wanting to do for a while now because understanding why your kids' tanks run low is one thing, but knowing what to do when you're already in it, when the shoes are still off and the clock is ticking, and somehow a regular Tuesday morning has turned into a full scale standoff, and you don't even know how that happened.

That's where we're going today. Today we're talking about power struggles, what they actually are, what makes them worse, and yes, some of what you're doing is accidentally pouring fuel on the fire, and most importantly, what you can do instead. And I wanna start with a line that I think is going to stick with you.

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Are you ready? You, yes. You do not have to attend. Every argument your kid invites you to, let me say that again. You do not have to attend every argument your kid invites you to because most of us were showing up to every single argument on time, fully dressed, reporting for duty, and ready to go. I remember the first time I heard this statement.

Honest to goodness, it was life changing for me. I kid you not, I am not in any way being dramatic. You do not have to attend every argument you are invited to. By the way, this is also a helpful statement with family members, neighbors, coworkers. You do not have to attend every argument you are invited to.

Now, I want you to picture something. Picture. It's a regular morning, nothing special. You're trying to get out the door. Things seem to be going pretty well. You look at your kid and you say, calmly, really, genuinely calmly, it's time to put your shoes on. We need to go silence. So you say it again a little more firmly this time, Hey, shoes, please, and they turn their body away from you.

Maybe they're still watching a show or their mid Lego build, or they're just doing nothing and still ignoring you. Now all of a sudden, you feel the clock ticking. You can hear it, tick talk, tick talk. You might not even be looking at the clock, but you can feel it and your voice gets this edge. You didn't plan for it to be there.

The edge, it just shows up and suddenly you're saying things like, I'm not going to ask you again. I mean it this time. If you don't put those shoes on right now, and then they either cave with maximum drama. Stomp their way to their shoes or they push back harder. And either way, by the time you actually get out the door, both of you are wrecked.

It feels like the morning is ruined and you're driving to school wondering how something so small turned into something so big. Sound familiar? Yeah, I get it. I've been there too. Here's what I want you to do right now. I want you to think about what your version of the shoes is, because for every family it might be different.

Maybe it's screen time, maybe it's starting homework. Maybe it's what's for dinner or the tone they use when they talk to you, or the fact that they will not talk to you

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or the scrolling the phone and ignoring you, or the fighting with their sibling. Whatever it is, whatever that thing is, that always seems to turn into a battle.

That's your thing. That's your shoes. Got it. Okay. Hold on to that because everything we talk about today applies directly to that thing or that situation. So let's talk about what a power struggle actually is. Okay. Here's the reframe, and this one is big, so I want you to let it really land. A power struggle is not capital N, capital O, capital T.

A power struggle is not your child being defiant. It's not a character flaw. It's not about them trying to manipulate you or prove they're the boss or make you lose your mind. It's not, I promise you, a power struggle is what happens when two nervous systems tip into reaction at the same time. We've talked about pause and respond, and we talked about react.

So let me say that again. A power struggle is what happens when two nervous systems tip into reaction at the same time, and I want you to think about that for a second. Your kid pushes and maybe the pushing is getting loud, or maybe it's ignore. At either extreme, your kid pushes and then you push back and then they dig in harder.

Then you get louder and they escalate and you threaten, and suddenly neither of you is actually trying to solve the problem anymore. You're both just trying not to lose. You've both been hijacked by your own nervous systems and the goal, which might be the shoes or the screen time or the homework, that thing has completely disappeared.

Now it's just who blinks first. And here's what I know for certain, after 17 plus years of working with parents, it takes two to keep a power struggle going. Your kid cannot sustain a power struggle alone. They don't have the capacity. They need a co-pilot or a co-conspirator in that moment. And when you engage, when you match their escalation, when you take the bait, the copilot is you.

And I wanna be really clear here. I am not blaming you. I am not trying to shame you. I'm saying the opposite of that because here's why this matters. If it takes two to keep a power struggle going and you are one of the two, then you have way

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more influence over how this goes than you think. You're not powerless in these moments.

The truth is you're actually the most powerful person in the room. You're the adult. You have the fully developed brain, and you have the capacity for regulation that your kid is still developing. You are the most powerful person in the room. I wanna tell you about a moment with Malcolm that completely changed how I understood power struggles, and I mean completely how I understood power struggles.

He was 15. I'll never forget this day. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and he had been home from school for about an hour. He was sitting at the kitchen counter scrolling his phone, and I walked into the kitchen ready to get dinner started. Now, one of Malcolm's chores at the time was putting the dishes away from the dishwasher when they were clean.

I like it done before I start cooking. And Malcolm knew this. We'd had many conversations and even a couple power struggles in the past over this. I like the dishwasher completely empty so that when I begin to cook dinner, I can be efficient. I can put the dirty dishes and bowls and utensils straight into the dishwasher.

So after dinner, there's less cleanup. So I looked at him and I said, Hey, can you put the dishes away please? And let me tell y'all something. He did not look up. He did not pause the scroll. He just said, no, nothing else. No. And continued to scroll. That was it. No explanation, no attitude, even, just no. And I want you to understand something.

I have been doing this work at this point for years, and I teach this, and in that moment, in full transparency, I wanna share with you that I was instantly dysregulated. Like zero to a hundred in about three seconds flat. Every part of me wanting to open my mouth and just lose it on him, just completely lose it.

How dare you don't talk to me like that. What do you mean? You know, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But here's what I did instead, and I want you to hear this because it matters. I left the room. I kid you not, I walked out of the kitchen. I didn't say anything. I just. Turned around and walked into my bedroom and closed the door.

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Now, I walked in my bedroom to gain control of myself, to pause and respond and gather my thoughts so that I could come back out and explain to him why he needed to put the dishes away. So I'm in the bedroom. Picture this, I'm in my bedroom. The door's shut. I'm taking a bunch of deep breaths, big inhales, big exhales.

So that my vagus nerve will relax my body. I walked in circles for a couple minutes. I'm not even kidding. And I began to gather myself. I started to think about what I was gonna say when I went back into the kitchen, that was a pause and respond. I thought about how I was gonna keep my voice calm, how I was going to hold the limit of putting the dishes away without picking up the rope.

I was in my bedroom for probably three or four minutes, maybe five, and finally I decided it was time to walk back in the kitchen. So I'm walking back into the kitchen and I stop dead in my tracks because guess what was happening? Malcolm was putting the dishes away. I was totally gobsmacked, as they would say in the uk, and it is the appropriate use of the word.

He hadn't heard a lecture from me. I hadn't threatened him. There was no countdown, no consequence, no showdown. I just paused and left the room, and what I realized is that he needed a minute. He needed a minute to absorb what I was asking. He needed some autonomy to be able to choose to put the dishes away.

And he needed me not to engage in a power struggle with him. I'm telling you, I remember this moment like it was yesterday, and I just stood there completely stunned because in that moment I began to understand something that I had only ever understood intellectually before. The power struggle really wasn't about the dishes, it was about the dynamic.

He wasn't refusing because he didn't want to do the chore. The chore probably took four minutes tops. Strong-willed kids so often engage in the struggle to avoid the request, to avoid being told what to do, to avoid having their autonomy taken away, and the power struggle becomes the escape route. And when I walked outta that room.

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I took the escape route with me and I really truly believe in parenting. Less is more. Most of us really need to understand less is more. I have never felt that so clearly in my bones until that afternoon in my kitchen, and this is what's available to you every single time. So now that we understand what a power struggle actually is, let's talk about the things that we do with the best of intentions that accidentally pour gasoline on the fire.

And, you know, I wanna say this upfront. These are not bad parent moves. These are what reasonable, exhausted, trying their hardest parents do, including me from time to time, including parents that I work with who are great parents and love their kids. Than anyone. So if you hear yourself in any of these, I wanna encourage you to stay curious, not judgmental.

Okay? So mistake number one, I call the warning spiral, and here's how this one goes. You ask your kid to do something and they don't move, and you ask again and still nothing, and you repeat yourself a little more terse, urgent, intense. Next time. Then comes the countdown. I'm going to count to 3 1 2, and nothing happens at three.

So then comes the threat. If you don't do that right now, then you know, fill in the blank. There's no TV tomorrow. I'm taking your phone away. You're gonna go to your room. There's gonna be no cookie after dinner. And then what happens? There's a cookie tomorrow, there's TV because. You have many kids and you can't punish all of them because one won't do what you said or you hand over the phone because they need to call you when practice is over.

Here's the thing about kids. They are brilliant pattern recognizers, way better than we give them credit for, and what your child has learned through dozens and dozens and dozens of these interactions. Is that they don't actually have to respond until you reach a certain level, until your voice gets to that pitch or until you say that threatening phrase, until you really mean it, you're actually training them to ignore you.

The first couple times, it's like setting an alarm clock and hitting snooze over and over and over again. Eventually the first alarm means nothing. Because your body knows you can hit snooze two or three times and fall back asleep because the alarm

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clock is right next to the nightstand. Your kid has learned to wait it out because the pattern has taught them that they can, you've actually trained them that they can wait it out, and the more warnings you give, the less each warning means.

The more the threat doesn't materialize, the less weight your words carry. This isn't about them being disrespectful. This is about patterns and patterns work on all of us. Mistake number two, I call the negotiation trap. And this one gets the best of us, especially those of us who wanna be thoughtful, conscientious parents who explain our reasoning, which for the record is on point and a good instinct.

Explaining helps kids understand the world. I'm not telling you to stop explaining or advising you to stop explaining, but there's a version of explaining that turns into a full debate. And once you're in a debate, the boundary is already in trouble. Here's what I mean. You say it's time to leave for school.

Your kid says, why do we have to go now? Why can't we leave in five more minutes? And instead of holding firm, you find yourself saying. Because school starts at eight 30, and if we're late, your teacher will mark you tardy, and then you'll miss morning meeting. And then you'll get some tardies carved up in a row, and before you know it, it sounds like blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

And your kid is arguing that your teacher doesn't actually care about tardiness, and it's okay if they're late. And suddenly you find yourself in a full negotiation about whether five minutes late really matters. Somehow you've completely lost the thread, and then on top of it, you spent five minutes debating.

So now you really are late. Here's what happens the moment you begin explaining. In the middle of a power struggle, you send a signal. The signal is, this decision is open for discussion. Okay? This decision is open for discussion and smart kids, especially strong-willed kids, will discuss. Here's the part most parents don't realize.

This is where the neuroscience really matters. When your kid is already escalating their thinking, brain is essentially offline. Logic requires a regulated nervous system, so no matter how clear your reasoning is, no matter how perfectly you frame it, you're delivering it to a brain that literally cannot receive it right now.

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More words do not help. More words overwhelm and an overwhelmed nervous system doesn't comply. Defense. That's not the moment to be debating whether tardiness matters. That's the moment to give one calm sentence and then follow through. That's it. We'll talk about exactly what that sounds like in a minute, so hang with me.

Mistake number three is fighting every hill. This one is more subtle, but it might be the most draining of all three. When we, as the parents are already depleted, when our own tank is low because of all the other things going on in our life, everything starts to feel non-negotiable. The shoes and the tone of voice they use and the eye roll and the way they say fine, and the fact that they're not looking at us when we're talking and suddenly we're fighting.

On five fronts at once, all before 8:00 AM Here's what I want you to ask yourself in this moment. Is this the hill I want to die on or am I just too depleted right now to let it go? Because some, some things are the hill, like maybe it's really important to you that your kid gets to school on time. I hear that maybe the hill is about safety or respect or non-negotiables in your family.

Those are worth holding firm on for sure, but a lot of what we turn into battles isn't actually the hill. It's just a hill that happened to be in front of us at the moment, and we're in the habit of taking on every single battle. This is where I wanna remind you, you do not have to join every argument you're invited to.

Okay, so now let's talk about the practical part. Three moves that actually do work, and here's what I want you to do instead. Okay? Move. Number one is I want you to slow the energy. Your nervous system is contagious. We've talked about this a lot in past episodes, and I want you to hear that again. Maybe you're, maybe you're new here and this is your first time listening, or it's never bad to have the reminder that your nervous system is contagious.

When urgency and frustration creep into your voice, your child's nervous system picks it up and before they've even fully processed your words, they feel your tone before they understand your message. And a nervous system that feels pressure to fend itself. And with many of our strong-willed kids that defense looks like resistance.

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Okay, let me say that again. Our kids feel our tone before they understand our message. And a nervous system that feels pressured defends itself. And with our underdeveloped brained strong-willed kids that defense looks like resistance. I know that's what was happening with Malcolm when I asked him to put the dishes away.

So the most powerful thing you can do at the first sign of escalation is to go slower. Not louder, not more urgent, slower, fewer words. Steady your voice, a deliberate pause before you speak. Now, for many of us, this may feel odd or uncomfortable or counterintuitive, especially if you grew up in a home where you were hardwired.

When things got more urgent and louder, you acted outta fear. The most powerful thing you can do at the first sign of escalation, I promise you, is to go slower, not louder, not more urgent, slower, fewer words, steadier voice, a deliberate pause before you speak again. Think about it this way. You are the thermostat in your home.

You get to set the temperature when you stay regulated. You give your kids nervous system something to co-regulate with, and a regulated nervous system is so much more willing to cooperate than one that's on the defensive through resistance. Yeah. Yeah. Okay, move number two. You're gonna offer contained control.

This one feels like magic. The first time it works. I'm serious. Parents message me about this all the time. Here's the insight. Strong-willed kids don't actually fight limits. They fight feeling powerless. What looks like defiance is almost always a child saying in the only way they know how often. In an ugly way, I need to feel like I have some say here.

So give them, say inside the limit, not you have to brush your teeth right now. Instead, it might be time to brush your teeth. Do you wanna do it upstairs or downstairs? The limit doesn't move. The teeth are getting brushed, but they get to make a choice. Their need for autonomy got met and the power struggle, it never had to happen.

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You might also say, do you wanna put your shoes on first and then brush your teeth or brush your teeth and then put your shoes on? Here's another example. Instead of, we're leaving in two minutes, go get your shoes on. You might say, we're leaving in two minutes. Do you wanna put your shoes on now? After you grab your backpack, same outcome.

It's just a totally different energy. Now I wanna be clear about this. This is not manipulation. This is not tricking your kid. This is understanding what your kid actually needs, which is a sense of agency and control over their own life, and finding ways to honor that while still holding the boundary is good connected parenting.

I remember I used to say to Malcolm all the time, do you wanna shower before dinner or after dinner? I used to give him choices all the time. Do you wanna brush your teeth now or in five minutes? Do you wanna get your pajamas on first and then brush your teeth or the other way around? I'm telling you, offer contained control often feels like magic.

The first time it works. Now hear me on this. We're not saying, do you wanna brush your teeth now or never? This is the concept that you're offering it inside the limit. You're still getting shoes on and getting out the door on time. The question is, get the backpack on first, and then shoes, or shoes and then backpack.

Make sense? Okay. Let's talk about move number three in our parenting, which I call drop the rope. Picture a tug of war. You're on one end and your kid is on the other, and you're both pulling. The only way a tug of war keeps going is for both people to keep tugging, to hold onto the rope. The moment one person drops the rope, the whole thing collapses and the game is over.

You cannot play tug of war by yourself. So move number three is about you realizing that at any moment you can drop the rope. When your child says, you can't make me, or This is so unfair, or I hate this. That is an open invitation to join an argument, and you get to decide whether you're gonna accept it or not in that moment.

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Here's what dropping the rope looks like in peaceful parenting. You stay warm, non-defensive, you stay calm and regulated. You acknowledge what they're feeling and you hold the boundary while doing all this. It might sound like this, I hear you. This feels really unfair right now, and we're still leaving in five minutes.

That's it. No lecture, no debate, no cold shoulder, no withdrawal, warmth. Just I see you. I'm not going to fight you, and we're still doing the thing, putting the phone away, leaving in five minutes, putting phones away at dinner, turning the TV show off, making our way to get our bath and get bedtime ready.

Now the first few times you do this, you try this tool, your child might actually escalate. So be prepared for that because they're not used to you dropping the rope. They're used to you picking up the rope and battling. So this shift is going to confuse them the first few F times. But don't be discouraged.

Stay with it. What you're doing is you're teaching them through repetition that the argument doesn't go anywhere anymore. You're replacing the old pattern of power, struggling with a new pattern. Okay? There's no point in pulling because you're not gonna pull back. You've dropped the rope, and over time the invitations to fight come less and less often from them.

The truth is they learn to trust you. They learn that you're firm on the boundaries while delivering them empathetically. I call this a strong spine, soft heart, and they learn to trust you. It's so beautiful. I can't wait for you to experience this, so let me share a story with you. I bet a mom in the hive who had this experience, I've changed some of the details to protect her privacy, but honestly, I see this pattern all the time.

So let's call this mom Jenna. Jenna came to me. She joined the Hive at the end of her rope, Jenna's 9-year-old son, we'll call him. Cam was turning every transition into a war zone. Turning screens off, shoes on, dinnertime, bedtime, homework, getting up in the morning. It didn't matter. Every single thing became a negotiation or a battle.

Jenna told me that she had started dreading the end of the school day because she knew what would be waiting for her when she picked her son up from school. So

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when we first started working together inside the hive, the first thing I noticed was how hard Jenna was working in these moments. She, and you may relate to this, she was explaining reasoning, threatening, warning, pleading.

And the truth is, she was exhausted before the argument even started. And Cam, he had learned that none of it really meant anything until Jenna reached a certain level of frustration. So we worked on two things together. First we worked on Jenna, noticing the rope, not reacting to it, just noticing it. And just asking herself, am I being invited to an argument right now?

And that awareness alone started shifting things because then Jenna could choose to pause and respond instead of just reacting and joining every argument that Cam invited her to by picking up the rope and playing tug of war. So slowly she recognized that she could choose her response. Much like I did when I asked Malcolm to put the dishes away and he said no.

So that was great. The second thing we started working on is Jenna started using contained control before screens went off, before shoes needed to go on, she'd offer a small choice, and honestly, the small choice was brand new to her. So she admitted that in the beginning it felt really awkward. But she started offering cam a small choice, something real, something meaningful to cam inside the boundary.

That's the key point there. And slowly, not overnight, but slowly over a few weeks, the daily battle started softening. What Jenna told me about six weeks in is something I still think about. She said, Lisa, I feel like I finally stopped arguing with him and battling. And the weird thing is. Is that he's so much easier to be with now.

Like he just settled. Well, this is what happens when kids stop needing to fight for control. They settle. Not because you give them everything they wanted, but because they start trusting you and themselves and that you heard them. And let me just say, I want that for you and I want that for your kids. It is one of the most beautiful transformations that happens in our relationship with our kids.

So I wanna give you two pieces of homework this week, and you're ready for both of them, I promise. So homework number one, for the next seven days, every time

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you feel a power struggle starting, so you've gotta pay attention. Notice it. What I want you to ask yourself is, am I being invited to an argument?

Right now, and do I want to attend it? Okay. You're not gonna do it perfectly and you won't do it a hundred percent of the time, but the goal here is to get you to start noticing how often your kids offer you that invitation and how automatically you've been RSVPing. Yes. That awareness alone is gonna start shifting things.

And then homework number two, pick your one thing. Your shoes, that one recurring struggle in your house that happens over and over. And this week I want you to try the contained control. Move over that one thing. Give your kid or kids two real choices inside the boundary. Just once, try it, see what happens, and then I wanna hear about it.

DM me on Instagram at the space. Peaceful space. Parent, come find me on Instagram and tell me how it went, because these messages honestly make my whole week. So share with me if you will please. Okay, let's land this plane. Here's what we covered today. A power struggle's not about defiance. It's what happens when two nervous systems tip into reaction at the same time.

And because it takes two nervous systems to power struggle, you have more influence over how it goes than you think. Okay. We also talked today about three things that accidentally make it worse. The warning spiral where kids learn to wait you out. The negotiation trap where overexplaining signals that the boundary is up for debate and where a dysregulated brain simply cannot receive your logic, no matter how good it is.

And finally, fighting every hill when our depleted tank turns everything into a battle that doesn't need to be won. Okay. And we talked about three moves that actually work. You slowing the energy because your nervous system is contagious. You offering contained control because your kid doesn't just fight limits.

They fight feeling powerless and drop the rope because you don't have to attend every argument you're invited to. And here's what I wanna leave you with today. You're not trying to win. You're trying to stay connected with your kid while holding the limit, warmth and firmness together. Strong spine, soft heart.

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It's not easy, it's a skill and like every skill, it gets better with practice and with grace for yourself on the days it doesn't go the way you hoped. Okay, the next time your kid hands you the rope, take a breath, set it down. And remember, you are the steadiest nervous system in the room. Even when it doesn't feel like that, especially when, and if you're ready to go deeper, if you want personalized strategies for your strong-willed kid and your specific power struggles, that's exactly what we do inside the hive.

You can find us@thehivecoaching.com. Come join us. You won't regret it. And 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. See you soon.