

Ep. #277: Why Your Kid Loses It When Screen Time Ends (It's Not What You Think)



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 today. And can I just say something before we dive in? If you listen to the last episode, my conversation with Carl from Bright Canary, welcome back. That conversation got me totally fired up because everything Carl and I talked about led me straight to today's topic.

And if you haven't heard that episode yet, I recommend you go back and listen. It's definitely worth your time and you can listen after today's episode. But today, today we're coming home. Today we're getting out of the big picture and into the trenches in your living room, in your kitchen, in your car, into the real everyday moments that are driving parents absolutely crazy right now.

Yes. Today we're gonna talk about screens and specifically. Why it is so hard for our kids to stop watching. Stop scrolling. Stop playing. Why it's time to turn it off has become one of the most dreadful sentences in family life. And most importantly, what is actually going on inside your child's brain when you say it?

And here's what I want you to hear before we go any further. Your kid is not addicted. To laziness. They are not choosing a screen over you. And this is not a willpower problem. It's a brain problem. And once you understand what's actually happening in there, everything changes. So let's go. Yeah. Okay. I want you to picture a regular afternoon.

Your kid has been on a device for a while. Maybe it's a show they love, maybe it's a game they're deep into. Maybe it's an endless scroll of short videos where just one bleeds into the next, and they're quiet, they're content, and honestly, part of you is grateful for the half an hour of peace, right?

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You're picturing this, I'm sure it happens in your home regularly, but then dun, dun dun. It's time. It's time. And you give the five minute warning. You calmly say five more minutes and then it's time to turn it off and you get nothing. So five minutes pass and you say it again, and then they say, just one sec.

And you say, no, it's time. And then it erupts. And you know, this is one of those, if you know, you know, you know what it erupts looks like right. Crying, screaming, running away. You always do this, ignoring you. Maybe the device gets thrown or they go limp, or they stop down the hallway and slam the door, and you're standing there thinking, what just happened?

It's a screen. I gave them plenty of time. I warned them. We talked about this before. Why is this so hard? Yeah. Yeah. Here's what most parents do in that moment. They think one of two things. Either my kid must be addicted and you spiral into guilt and worry. Or you think this is manipulation. They just want what they want, and you double down on the consequences.

Now here's what's going on. Both of these thoughts miss on what's actually happening, and today I wanna share with you what's really going on. Sound good? Awesome. So here's the science, and I promise this is going to make so much click into place for you. So when your kid is watching, playing, or scrolling, at almost any age, their brain is releasing dopamine.

And dopamine is that feel-good chemical released in your brain. It's the one that drives pleasure, motivation, and engagement. It's the same chemical that makes us wanna check our phones. Finish a good book. Keep playing a game. Buy that shirt that looks really good on us. That's dopamine and it's not bad.

It's just brain chemistry. Now here's the aha moment. Screens. Oh my gosh, listen to me. Screens are dopamine machines. There is thousands of people working in companies to trigger. This dopamine release over and over and over again. The autoplay that starts the next video before you've even decided you wanna watch it, the infinite scroll that never has a natural stopping point.

The reward systems inside games that keep you saying just five more minutes from the next level, none of that is an accident. It is engineering designed. To trigger

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dopamine release over and over and over again. From the company standpoint, that's what it's meant to do. It's doing its job, the app, the channel that supplies endless videos, the social media that our kids join, the gaming, it is designed through engineering to trigger the user.

At any age to have a dopamine release over and over and over again. So what happens is your kid's brain is flooded with dopamine while they're watching or gaming or enjoying or scrolling, and because their brain is flooded with dopamine, everything feels stimulating, engaging, rewarding. Their nervous system is lit up with pleasure.

Then you say, turn it off, and the dopamine drops fast. The mere thought of the dopamine going away causes panic. And here's the part I really need you to hear. A kid's brain, which we've discussed in many podcast episodes, is not fully developed until 25. So a kid's brain, which is still developing the ability to regulate emotions.

Still building the part of the brain responsible for managing frustration and disappointment registers even the threat of the dopamine drop. It registers even the mere mention of it as a threat, not a mild inconvenience, a genuine nervous system level threat. And when there's a nervous system level threat, fight or flight, fawn or freeze kicks in.

You following that? Whenever the nervous system registers a threat, this happens to be a dopamine drop, as a threat, a genuine nervous system level threat. Fight flight fawn or freeze kicks in and guess who looks like the enemy? Now you do because you're the one who took away the thing that felt good. You become the threat.

This is why the reaction feels so completely out of proportion to what just happened. It's not about the show. It's not about you. It's a nervous system in genuine distress, doing exactly what nervous systems do when they feel threatened. If you've been listening to this podcast for a while, especially episodes 274 and 275, you already have the language for this.

This is the tolerance tank that we talked about in those episodes hitting empty in real time. So what's happening is your kid has a nervous system that just got

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hijacked. Your child is not manipulating you. They're almost instantaneously disregulated. And if you can understand that and wrap your brain around it and remember this in the moment, it changes everything.

About how we respond. Yeah. Okay. Now I wanna talk about how we're accidentally making it harder. I wanna talk about something that might feel a little bit uncomfortable because this part is about us, the parents, a lot of us, and I mean a lot, have at some point handed our kid a device to help them calm down.

Maybe your toddler was melting down at a restaurant and you pulled up a show on your phone. Maybe your 8-year-old had a rough day at school and you let them decompress with the game. Maybe it's just the thing you do on long car rides or when you need to make dinner or when there has been a lot and you need 10 minutes of quiet and let's call it what it is.

It works beautifully. Screens are genuinely incredibly effective at soothing big emotions in the moment. They're engaging, they're predictable, they're distracting. They flood the brain with dopamine. Remember, that's feel-good chemical, and suddenly the meltdown stops and everyone can breathe again.

There's actually a term for this, it's called digital soothing. And listen, I promise you, I am not here to shame you if you've used digital soothing with your kid before. I've done it. Every parent I know has done it, and we'll all probably do it again. Here's the problem, and I really need you to hear this.

When screens become the main way, the main way a child learns to manage big feelings, frustration, boredom, anxiety, restlessness, uncomfortable feeling of not knowing what to do with themselves, they get fewer and fewer chances to build any other soothes and regulation skills. Here's what happens. The brain is learning.

When I feel bad, a screen makes it better and it runs that pattern over and over and over again. Not because your kid is weak or lazy, because that's what brains do. They find what works and they stick with it. I bet you drive to work or to school drop off the same way every morning without even really thinking about it, even if there's multiple ways to go.

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Our brain loves to run patterns over and over and over again. I brush my teeth every morning. As soon as I get up, I don't even have to make the decision. I get up, I go to the bathroom, I walk straight to the sink, and I brush my teeth. That's a pattern my brain is running. The brain loves to be efficient, so what happens is over time the dependency deepens, it deepens.

Not because of too much screen time in the abstract, but because screens become the primary tool in the emotional regulation toolkit, and when the tool gets taken away, there's nothing else in the toolkit. So I want you to sit with a question for a second, and I want you to ask yourself, when does your kid reach for a screen at any age?

Is it when they're bored after a hard day at school, when emotions are running high, when they don't know what to do with themselves? Just notice it. You don't need to fix it today. Just notice the pattern, because noticing is always where the change begins. Okay, practical time. Here's what you can actually do starting this week.

Move number one, the brain aware transition warning. Here's what I know for sure. Five minutes is not always enough runway, especially for younger kids or kids who are deep in a game or kids whose nervous systems are particularly sensitive to transitions. And if you've been listening to this podcast for a while, you probably know exactly which kid in your house that is.

So in this instance, their brain needs more time. To start coming off the dopamine before the drop hits. So give it more time. Try this 10 minutes out. You say In 10 minutes we're turning off the screen. Find a good stopping point and then ask 'em to repeat what you just said. So you know they heard them at five minutes.

You say five minutes, it's almost time to wrap up. Then at two minutes, you say, two more minutes. Start saying goodbye to thee. Game or show or app. And then when the time comes, you follow through calmly without the speech, without the negotiation, and with no anger. What you're doing when you follow this is you're giving their nervous system a soft landing instead of a cliff edge.

More warning, more predictability, more consistency, less crash. Less anger and dysregulation on your part. Now, does this guarantee no meltdown? No, not

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always, but it makes smooth landing significantly more likely. And over time, it teaches their brain that the end is coming. It's not a surprise attack because again, now you're helping their brain run a pattern over and over and over again.

So the more you do this, the more you create the pattern of the soft landing. The more their brain will be prepared to run that pattern. Make sense? Okay, move. Number two. I want you to name what's happening without judgment, so when the meltdown starts, because sometimes it will, even with great transitions, here's what helps most.

Don't fight the emotion. Name it. You could say, I know that felt really sudden. Your brain was really into the game. The show. The scrolling, the videos, your brain was really into that and stopping his heart, that's all you say. That's it. You're not giving in, you're not changing the boundary. You're not rewarding the meltdown.

You're acknowledging the real biological experience you're kid is having. You're naming it. You're acknowledging it. And a kid who feels genuinely understood and connected deescalates so much faster. Than the one who feels judged, ignored, or punished for having big feelings. This is the co-regulation piece.

You've heard me talk about this many, many, many times before. You are the steady nervous system in the room. You are the thermostat. When you stay regulated, when you can name what's happening without escalating, that's a really important piece. Without escalating, you give your kids nervous system something to come back to.

Now this may not feel natural at first for either of you, and it may not go well. The first couple of times. You're gonna wanna correct and lecture and explain why screen time is over. You can do all that later. Right now in the storm, your number one and only job is to remain calm and consistent with the limit you set.

Sound good? Okay, move number three is build a bridge, the landing activity. One of the most effective things you can do is have something waiting on the other side of the screen. Not as a bribe, but as a bridge. You might say, after we turn this off, let's go shoot some hoops. That's what used to work in our household.

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Shooting free throws. You could say, Hey, now that you're done, let's go get a snack together. Or you could say, Hey, I wanna show you something funny I saw today. You're giving the nervous system of your kid something to move towards instead of only focusing on what it's losing. And here's the beautiful thing, movement, connection and food are three of the fastest, most natural ways to shift to dysregulated nervous system.

And if you can offer any of those right after the screen goes off, you're giving their brain a different kind of dopamine. One that doesn't come with a crash. Now, I know you can't do this every time. I get that. Life doesn't always allow for a landing activity, but when you can, it makes a real difference, I promise.

And move. Number four is auditing the digital soothing pattern. Try saying that fast four times. Now, move number four is the long game. And to be honest, it's the most important one. I wanna encourage you to start paying attention to windscreens. Get handed to your kid. As an emotional tool, not to judge yourself, just to get honest with how often it happens, and then one at a time.

Start introducing alternatives to the screen. What does your child love? What gets them in their body? Music, drawing, building something together, time outside cooking, shooting baskets, going for a walk, going to the park. You're not trying to eliminate the screens. What you're doing here is making sure screens aren't the only regulation tool in the toolkit you're building alongside, not taking away, because here's the long-term goal.

A kid who can feel bored and tolerated, that's the goal. A kid who can feel frustrated and find a way through a kid who doesn't need a screen just to feel okay, that's where we're building towards. Not a screen free childhood, just a childhood where the screen isn't doing all the emotional work. Does that make sense?

I wanna tell you about a mom I've worked with. I've changed some of the details, but this is the pattern I see over and over and over again. Let's call her Mary. Mary had a 10-year-old son, we'll call him Theo, and the daily screen battle was absolutely destroying their afternoons. Every single day turning off the Xbox was a war.

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Theo would rage cry, say things like, I hate this family. Sometimes he would even throw things and Mary had tried everything. Sticker chart timers, warning, taking away completely, giving longer screen times on weekends, bargaining, offering a reward. She tried everything and nothing worked, and she was starting to really worry.

Something was seriously wrong with her kid. So when Mary first joined the Hive and started getting coaching, the first thing I noticed was how she was framing the problem. She kept saying, he's so addicted, he has no self-control. And every time Theo melted down, she responded with anger and punishment because she was really interpreting his behavior as a defiance.

So the first shift we made was the frame. I told Mary what I've told you today. This isn't defiance. This is a brain in distress. Theo's nervous system was getting hijacked every single afternoon when even the anticipation of the dopamine drop reared its head, and nobody was helping him with the soft landing.

So we worked on two things. First, she started giving him more runway, 10 minutes, five minutes, two minutes, and a consistent follow through with a calm voice. Second, and this was the harder one for Mary. She started staying regulated. Even when the meltdown came instead of escalating, she'd get low, stay calm and say, I know bud.

Your brain doesn't wanna stop. You're having so much fun, and what I'm asking is really hard. And that's all she would say while she was holding the boundary of its time to turn it off at the end of the 10 minute warning. Now, let me be honest. The change didn't come overnight. The first week was rough for both of them.

Theo didn't know what to do with a mom who wasn't fighting back. Theo didn't know what to do with the 10 minute countdown and the soft landing. But slowly, over about three weeks, the duration of the meltdown started shrinking. Then one afternoon, Theo turned off the Xbox when the timer went off and just came upstairs into the kitchen.

No meltdown, no drama. Mary sent me a message that night and she said, Lisa, he just came into the kitchen. When the timer went off, I almost cried. I didn't even

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know that was possible and I would put a bow on this story with. That's what happens when we stop fighting the behavior and begin to understand the brain behind it, and that's what happens inside the hive on the regular.

Let's bring it home. Here's what we covered today. When your kid melts down because the screen went off, they're not manipulating you. I promise. They're not defiant. They're dysregulated. Their brain gets flooded with the dopamine. There's an announcement that the dopamine is going to end, and then the dopamine drops and their nervous system registers it as a threat and fight.

Flight fauna freeze kicks in. It's not a character problem. This is biology and the apps and the games and the shows and the videos. They're designed specifically intentionally designed to make stopping feel impossible. So I'd love for us all to give our kids a little more grace when they struggle. You and your kids are going up against billion dollar engineering and it's hard, but we can do this.

We can do this as parents. We talked today about digital soothing and how sometimes our kids fall into the habit of using screens to manage big feelings. It accidentally shrinks the emotional toolkit over time, and we talked about what actually helps, right? The brain aware, transition, warning, more runway, softer landing, naming what's happening without judgment, without escalation.

I know you don't wanna quit. I know you are having fun. I know this is really hard and we're done for the day. We talked about the landing activity, giving the nervous system something to move towards as much as you can, especially in the beginning. And we talked about auditing the digital soothing pattern.

I wanna encourage you to build a bigger toolkit alongside the screens, not instead of it. Through it all. The same thing has been true in every episode. This season, you are the steadiest nervous system in the room, even when it doesn't feel like it, especially when it doesn't feel like it. We're not trying to raise screen free kids in a screen filled world.

It's probably not even really possible. Well, we are trying to raise are kids who know how to feel things, manage feelings, and come back to themselves. Even

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when the screens go off, that's the goal and you're building it one afternoon at a time, and I'm committed to being here with you. Every step of the way.

Yeah. Awesome. 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](http://peacefulparent.com). See you soon.