

Ep. #278: Why Your Kid Reaches for a Screen When They're Upset



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 glad you're here. Last week in episode 277, we talked about why it is so hard for kids to put down a screen. We talked about that dopamine flood, the crash when the screen goes off, the meltdown that isn't defiance, but a nervous system in genuine distress.

And today I wanna take us a layer deeper because if you listen to that episode. You walked away understanding what happens at the screen, the on ramp, the off ramp, the emotional crash at the end, but there's a bigger story sitting underneath that one. And that story is what this episode is about. Today's episode is really about how screens are not a coping skill.

And here's the thesis. Write this down or screenshot it, tattoo it on your arm, whatever you need to do. We are not teaching our kids how to calm down when we give them electronics, when they're upset. We are teaching them how to check out. And let me walk you through what I mean. Let's zoom way out for a minute because before we talk about your kid and your living room, we have to talk about the culture we are parenting inside of.

We are raising children in a world where discomfort. Any discomfort is immediately avoidable, not just screens everything. Hungry, DoorDash, bored, electronics, awkward silence, electronics, a feeling you don't wanna feel, scroll, stream, or swipe. Our kids have never known a world without this, and the researchers who have been sounding the alarm on it, Jonathan ha.

Jean Twain and a lot of others have been saying in various ways the same core things for years now. What they've documented is staggering rising rates of anxiety and depression in kids plummeting, resilience, and a generation of young people who feel more fragile, more overwhelmed, more afraid of failure, more afraid of discomfort than previous generations ever were.

Ep. #278: Why Your Kid Reaches for a Screen When They're Upset

The pattern underneath all that, when we strip everything else away is this. Our kids are losing the ability to sit with discomfort, and it's not because they're weak or because they are spoiled, it's because they've been handed from the youngest ages, a tool that makes discomfort optional. A brain that learns over and over and over again.

The discomfort is optional, will stop building the muscles for it. That is the backdrop, that is the soil. Now let's talk about what grows in it. Last week I introduced the concept of digital soothing, using screens to help a kid manage big feelings. You know, a toddler melting down at a restaurant, an 8-year-old after a hard day at school.

A device on car rides, whether they're long or not, when the whining starts, and I named that, screens are remarkably, almost miraculously good at digital soothing. They work, the meltdown stops. Everybody breathes. And if you have done it and every parent I know has done it, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

But here's what I want you to hear, really hear today. Every time a screen is the thing that stops a meltdown, your child's brain is learning a sentence, and the sentence is, when I feel bad, I escape. That's what they're learning. Not when I feel bad, I get through it, not when I feel bad, someone helps me through it, not when I feel bad.

It passes. They are learning. When I feel bad, I escape. And because screens work so fast. Because that dopamine flood is so immediate, the brain begins to file it under emergency coping strategies. That definitely work. So the brain reaches for it again and again and again. Here's what is actually happening under the hood.

The kid is dysregulated, and that leads to a nervous system that is overwhelmed, and then a screen arrives and the screen delivers instant dopamine. Instant distraction, and this is the part that most parents miss. Instant emotional shutdown. The feeling gets interrupted before it even gets a chance to be named or processed.

So the feeling doesn't get metabolized or learned. It doesn't get integrated. It doesn't become something the kid understands about themselves. It just gets turned off like a light switch. And over hundreds of repetitions. The brain wires itself, not

Ep. #278: Why Your Kid Reaches for a Screen When They're Upset

towards resilience, but towards relief seeking. And this is the pattern we're laying down, whether we mean to or not, whether we know it or not, which is why I'm gonna say it again because this is the line of the whole episode.

We're not teaching our kids how to calm down with electronics. We're teaching them how to check out. When they're storming and dysregulated. Now I wanna be really clear here, 'cause I don't want anyone walking away from this episode thinking I'm saying screens are the devil or that they're bad. I am not saying that at all.

I have never said that not all screen use is harmful or bad. A show after school is not destroying your kid. A movie on a rainy Saturday or on Friday nights with pizza with the whole family is not rotting their brain. Playing a video game is not by itself a crisis. I happen to have a 20 almost 2-year-old that has been video gaming for many, many years and loves it.

The issue is not the moment. The issue is the pattern. Okay, let me show you the difference. Risky pattern. Kid feels upset, screen appears, feeling stops. Repeat, repeat, repeat. The screen becomes the primary way this kid learns to and manages his or her difficult emotions. The occasional use, the child is fine.

Watches a show because it's Tuesday afternoon and that's what you do on Tuesdays, or the screen comes on for entertainment and the screen goes off. And emotional regulation or emotional life is not hinging. On the TV show, the game or the screen. These are completely different things. The first is a regulation strategy.

Sometimes it happens by accident, but is repeated over and over and over again. And the second is just entertainment. So here's the question I wanna put at the center of this conversation. It's not about if screens are used, it's about what are they replacing? Are they replacing boredom? That would've become creativity.

Are they replacing a feeling that would've become growth? Are they replacing a conversation you would've had with your kid? Are they replacing a 10 minute wave of frustration that if ridden would've built something permanent in your child's nervous system and created resilience? This is the real question.

Ep. #278: Why Your Kid Reaches for a Screen When They're Upset

Not minutes per day, not apps versus no apps. What are we using the screens to serve or replace when our kids are upset? Okay, so if screens are not the coping skill, what is the coping skill and what are we actually trying to build? Well, I propose three things, and I encourage you to write these down.

Number one, distress tolerance. The ability to feel something unpleasant and not immediately need to make it stop. The ability to be uncomfortable without panicking about being uncomfortable. Number two, emotional endurance. The capacity to stay in a feeling long enough to learn what it's telling you. To let sadness be sad, to let frustration rise and fall to learn how to not treat every negative emotion like a house fire.

Number three, internal regulation. The set of skills that let a kid come back to themselves from the inside without needing or relying on an external tool to do it for them. And here's the thing about building these three things. You can't build them without discomfort. You can't. It's like trying to build muscles without ever lifting anything.

The whole mechanism requires the feeling to actually happen and the kid to stay in it long enough for something to change. So the line I want you to take with you is this. You don't build resilience by removing discomfort. You build it by staying with it and moving through it, and your kid cannot move through it alone.

This is where you come in. Your job, and please hear this carefully, is not to eliminate, not I repeat, not to eliminate your kids' discomfort. Your job is not to fix the feeling. Your job is not to make the frustration stop as fast as possible. Your job is to help your kid learn that they can feel something hard and survive it and come out the other side.

So what does this look like? Three step process. You know, I love threes. So here's the sequence. One, you acknowledge the feeling. This can't be new to you if you've been around for a while, right? I'm all about helping our kids acknowledge their feelings. You seem frustrated right now. That was really disappointing.

I can tell you're really upset. I can tell you don't wanna stop gaming, you just name it. You're not fixing it, you're witnessing it. And then number two, you stay

Ep. #278: Why Your Kid Reaches for a Screen When They're Upset

connected, you get close, you stay calm, you don't escalate. You remember that You're the anchor. And then number three, you help your kid ride the wave.

Not shortcut around it, not numb it, not drug it with the dopamine hit, but to ride it with you as the steady presence beside them. This my real world, peaceful parent. Co-regulation, and this is what we talk about on this podcast all the time. And when you do this over and over and over again, something extraordinary happens.

Your kid's nervous system starts to learn. Big feelings are survivable hard moments pass. I can do hard things and I'm not alone when I do them. That's the foundation. That's what we're building. Yeah. Yeah. Okay, let's put this into a sentence you can actually use in your home. For years, the conversation about screens has been stuck between two terrible polls on one side.

Screens are bad. We have to eliminate 'em. We have to restrict them on the other side. Screens are fine, everything's fine. Well, the truth is both are wrong in my opinion. And both miss the point. I wanna give you a much more useful framing. Screens are for entertainment. Screens are not for emotional regulation.

Let me say that again. Screens are for entertainment. Screens are not for emotional regulation or even simpler, and I love this one as a family value. You could actually say out loud in front of your kids around the dinner table. We don't use screens to avoid feelings. Now think about how different this is.

It doesn't shame screens. It doesn't villainize them, it just puts them in the proper category. Screens are for fun, for entertainment, for connection sometimes, but they are not the tool we reach for. When feelings get big and negative, there's a different tool for that. And that tool is a person, a parent, a human, not screens.

Now here's the practical shift before you hand over a screen. To a kid who's upset, who's bored, who's frustrated, or who's melting down, I want you to ask yourself one question, has my kid been supported emotionally? Yet? If the answer is no, and you hand over the screen anyway, you just used the screen to skip or suppress the feeling to digitally soothe, those are the moments that build the risky pattern.

Ep. #278: Why Your Kid Reaches for a Screen When They're Upset

Now if the answer is yes, if you've already acknowledged the feeling you've stayed connected and you helped him ride the wave, and now you're handing over a show because the day's been long and everyone's tired and your kid could use a break and be entertained for a few minutes while you get dinner, then that's fine.

That's screen is an entertainment, not digital soothing. Make sense? Now, I realize it's not easy, but it's simple. Instead of a meltdown leads to screen, we're building meltdown, connection, recovery, and then maybe if you want a screen, but a screen is entertainment, not as the regulator, not as the co-regulation, because that's you, that's your job.

And to be totally honest with you, screens do a horrible job of co-regulating with your kid. Instead, they just shut down the experience and prevent your kid from learning and growing and progressing and building resiliency. And hopefully you can see that. All right, now I need to talk to you directly for a minute, you the parent, because everything I said is easier to say than it is to do.

And I know that. And you know that too, and I'm not gonna pretend otherwise. So I wanna tell you a truth that doesn't get said enough on parenting podcasts, in my opinion. Sometimes the screen isn't just for the kid, it's for the parent's nervous system too. Hear that, don't flinch and just let it be true.

Sometimes you hand over the iPhone because let's be honest, our kid is about to lose it and we're about to lose it. One of you has to regulate and you've decided without articulating it to yourself that it's gonna be you. And the only way to make that happen is to take the kid out of the equation for a few minutes.

Now, that's not a character flaw. It's a tired, overwhelmed human being, doing the best we can in a culture that hands parents almost no support. I see you. I've been you. Every parent I know has been there. So I say this with no judgment, but, and this is where the awareness comes in. If you can name that this is what's happening for you, you've just unlocked a different door.

Because if that screen is actually for your nervous system, then the question becomes, what else could regulate you right now? A walk, five minutes in the bathroom with the door locked. Calling a friend, putting on music, asking your

Ep. #278: Why Your Kid Reaches for a Screen When They're Upset

partner to take over for 15 minutes, maybe even a good cry. Those are all options, and the truth is the screen is one option but not the only option.

And if the screen is quietly become your default option for your own overwhelm, that's worth noticing too. Without shame, without judgment. Just with the kind of honest eyes that lead you to a different choice next time. Because what we know is our kids don't do what we say they do what we model. So maybe we need to take inventory and ask how often are we modeling using the screen as our own digital soother?

Let me tell you about a mom I work with. Let's call her Megan. Megan has a 7-year-old son who on any given afternoon seemed to fall apart the minute he got home from school. You know how this goes, shoes off, backpack on the floor and within about four minutes he's crying, arguing with his sister and or melting down over something that seems microscopic.

Megan's response every single time was the same. She gave him the iPad. Take a break buddy. Decompress. When we started working together, the first thing I asked her was, walk me through what those moments feel like for you right before you hand the iPad over. She paused and thought about it and said, honestly, I feel like I can't do this.

Like if I don't get him calm in the next two minutes, I'm gonna snap, and I just want the noise and the chaos and the storming to stop. Lisa. And I said, okay, Megan, this is really important. The screen isn't regulating him. It's regulating you. Can we look at that? And she got really quiet because she had never seen it that way.

So we made two tiny shifts. First, when her son came through the door, Megan started meeting him before the meltdown. Not with the lecture, just with a hand on his shoulder and saying, I can see you're crashing. Hard day. Naming it, acknowledging it, and staying connected. Riding the wave with him for about 10 minutes before any screen ever entered the conversation.

And second, and this was the harder shift, Megan started asking herself what she needed in that window because what she realized is that she was also crashing at

Ep. #278: Why Your Kid Reaches for a Screen When They're Upset

three 30. She was hungry. Her back hurt from work all day, and she needed a minute. So she started taking it out loud in front of her son. She'd say, I'm gonna sit on the couch for five minutes and breathe.

And she'd tell him, you can sit with me if you want. I'd love for you to, or you can play quietly and then we'll have a snack. Within three weeks. The afterschool meltdowns weren't happening anymore, not because her son had magically matured, but because Meghan had stopped solving the meltdown with a screen, she started modeling out loud in front of him.

What real regulation actually looks like. She checked in about a month later and she said, Lisa, you're not gonna believe this, but yesterday my son asked me if I wanted to sit with him on the couch for five minutes. Lisa, he wanted to co-regulate with me. I didn't even know that was possible. Yes, it's possible when we create an awareness and when we make a commitment to use screens for entertainment.

Rather than regulation for ourselves and co-regulation with our kids, and that, my friend, that's what we build inside the Hive. Okay. One homework assignment this week, just one. Before you hand a screen to your kid when they're upset or bored or frustrated or melting down, ask yourself this question out and ask it out loud if you need to.

Has my kid been supported emotionally yet? Yet? If the answer's no, just try the sequence first. Acknowledge the feeling, stay connected, help him ride the wave, and then, then when we come out of the wave, you can hand the electronics over if you want, but not as a regulator, as entertainment afterwards, not during.

That's it. One question. Every time a screen is about to be handed over for an emotional reason. And if you wanna take it one step further, try saying out loud at dinner in the car. Whenever we use screens as entertainment, not as a regulator in our house, we don't use screens to avoid feelings. And then watch what happens.

And please, please, please let me know. Come find me on Instagram. I read every single message. You all leave me. The dms on Instagram, please let me know how it's going. Okay, let's bring it home. We're raising kids in a world where every

Ep. #278: Why Your Kid Reaches for a Screen When They're Upset

flicker of discomfort. I mean, heck, we're raising adults in a world where every flicker of discomfort can be instantly escaped, and the research is clear.

Kids who grew up without practicing tolerating distress don't become calmer. They become more anxious, more fragile, and more dependent on external fixes for their internal problems. Screens can be remarkable tools. They're also when used as emotional regulation, a shortcut that costs us the exact thing we are trying to build our kids' capacity.

So here's the reframe I want you to wear this week. Like armor screens are for entertainment, not for emotional regulation. In our house, we don't use screens to avoid feelings and the deepest truth underneath it all. The one I want ringing in your ear when you are three minutes from the meltdown and the iPad is right there and you're about to hand it over, is if we want emotionally strong kids, we cannot give them a way out of every hard feeling.

Comfort is not the goal. Capacity is. You are not trying to raise a kid who never feels uncomfortable. You're trying to raise a kid who knows how to feel uncomfortable, who knows that they are not alone in it, and who knows they will come to the other side. That's emotional intelligence. That's resilience, and that's the goal.

And you're building it one afternoon, one feeling, one wave at a time. Yeah. Yeah. 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.