

Ep. #281: You Trained Your Kid to Ignore You (And How to Undo It)



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 I need to start with something. Ready? I want you to think about the last time you asked your kid to do something and they didn't do it. It might have been very recently, like last hour or today. Maybe it was putting their shoes on.

Maybe it was turning off the TV. Maybe it was just looking up from their phone when you walked into the room. And I want you to think about what you did next. Did you ask again, maybe a little louder? Did you count to three? Did you threaten something, a consequence, or maybe a privilege that you'd take away?

Did you follow through on that threat, or did you kind of let it slide because you were tired or late, or you just didn't have the fight in you that day? I get it. I get it. Here's the part I really want you to sit with. Then did it happen again? The same situation, the same ask, the same non-response, the same version of you doing the same version of what you always do.

Maybe it's yelling, asking over and over again, escalating each time, asking and then threatening. If any of this sounds familiar, I want you to hear what I'm about to say, because it's gonna change how you see your kid's behavior, your own behavior, and the relationship between the two. And I want you to know that you are not, capital N, capital O, capital T, you are not failing at parenting.

You have been training your kid to respond exactly the way they're responding, and today I want to show you how this pattern or this system works. Now, before you have a reaction to that, I want to be very clear. This is not an indictment. This is not about blame. This is actually one of the most hopeful things I'm ever going to say to you, because here's the thing.

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If you built the pattern, you can change the pattern, and that is what today's episode is all about. Sound good? Okay, let's dive in. So let's talk about what training actually means, and what I mean is this. Every single interaction you have with your kid, every response, every reaction, every time you follow through, and every time you don't, is teaching them something, and it's building a pattern.

And here's what happens with human beings, all human beings. Over time, that pattern becomes the operating system of your relationship, okay? Let me give you some of the most common examples I use with parents, because it usually lands every time. All right. So imagine you ask your six-year-old to put their shoes on.

No response. And then you ask again with a little more urgency in your voice this time, and yep, nothing. And then you ask a third time. And maybe you even throw in a, "I'm not gonna ask you again." And then you ask again a fourth time. And finally, on the fifth ask, when your voice has reached a certain volume, a certain pitch, and a certain tone that says, "This is real, and I mean now," your kid gets up and puts their shoes on.

Can you relate to this? Does this happen in your home? And in that moment, what most parents think to themselves is, "Why do I have to yell?" I used to think this all the time when Malcolm was little. Why do I have to yell, Malcolm? Why do I have to yell? Well, here's the truth. You don't. You don't have to yell.

But what you do have to do is recognize the pattern you've been creating. You have to see that you've been training your kid or kids not to listen until your voice hits that certain volume, that certain intensity, that certain tone. And that, the fifth ask with that volume and that tone, that's the signal that you've taught them.

You've taught them to ignore you the first four times. And it isn't until you hit that volume and tone that they actually think, "Oh, now she's ready for me to put my shoes on." And here's the thing, once you see these patterns, really see it. It's pretty easy to change it. Now, I want to say this again because I really want it to land for you.

In the example above, you have trained your kid to ignore you the first four times. They're not ignoring you because they're disrespectful or difficult or defiant.

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They're ignoring you the first four times because that's the pattern they've learned, the pattern you've built together over dozens and dozens of mornings, is that your words don't mean anything until they reach a certain decibel, until the tone shifts, until they feel that specific urgency, then that's the signal to them that it's time to move and put the shoes on.

And again, I want to reinforce this. It's not, and I really hope you can see this, it is not because your kid or kids are being defiant. They're not being difficult. They're following the pattern you've established. They have learned through pure repetition exactly how this works. And I want to say something that might feel a little uncomfortable, but I think it's actually really freeing.

We train people all the time. It's part of being in relationships with people, and not intentionally, not maliciously, but we do it. And our kids train us too, by the way, but that's another episode. The question isn't whether you're training, because you are. If you're parenting, caregiving, taking in relationship with kids as grandparents or parents or co-parenting in different households, you are training your kids.

So the question isn't whether you're training. The question is, do I like what I'm training? Okay? That's the question. Now, let's get specific, because I want to name the patterns that I see most often, the ones that play on repeat in so many homes, including mine, including the homes of parents I work with who are really connected with their kids, because awareness is where everything changes.

All right? So pattern number one is the repeat and escalate pattern, and this is the one we just talked about. You ask once, maybe because you're in the other room doing something, or you're distracted. You ask once, ignore, ask twice, ignore, ask again, getting louder, threaten. Maybe there's a countdown, and then finally, at some specific level of urgency and volume, the kid responds.

So What is the kid learning? Well, they're learning words don't mean anything, volume means everything. I wait until I hear that volume, and then I know it's real. And what are we training ourselves to do as the parents? We're training ourselves that we have to escalate to be heard. We have to escalate. So we skip the calm ask, and we go straight to the urgency because we've learned that nothing happens without it.

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And now you've got a household that is constantly operating on an elevated temperature because everyone's learned that quiet and calm doesn't count. I don't want that for you, and I don't want that for your kids. Now, pattern number two is what I call the cave pattern, and this one is sneaky because it often comes from a really good place.

Okay? You set a limit, your child pushes back hard. Hard. It might be it's time to get off the iPad. 30 minutes are up. We agreed to 30 minutes. It's time to get off. And your kid pushes back hard. They cry. They rage. They make the moment so uncomfortable and so loud and intense and stormish that something in you just gives.

You adjust the limit. You extend the screen time. You let the consequence go. You find a reason why this one time is the exception, and your child feels relief. They get extra screen time. The consequence wasn't enforced, and if you're honest, you probably feel the relief, too, and that feels like resolution.

But here's what was just trained. Escalate long enough, and the limit disappears. Push hard enough, and mom or dad will move. Now, your kid isn't doing this consciously. They're not sitting there thinking, "Hmm, I have a strategy," or, "I know if I wear her down, so I'll set out to do this." They just know, and they know from the pattern, from the repetition, from the experience.

They learn from the pattern that intensity gets results, and so the intensity comes out every time a limit is set because that's what's worked. Okay? Pattern number three, the control pattern. This is the one I love to talk about because nobody sees it coming, and honestly, it's kind of sneaky. And this one is for all my parents who like to be in control, present company included, who, you know, those of us who plan the vacations.

We run the schedule. We manage the mornings. We know where everything is and how everything runs, and if we're honest, we just prefer to handle it ourselves because it's easier and faster, and it gets done right. I mean, yeah, I see you, and I am you. But here's what's happening. When one person drives the bus all the time, the other people on the bus stop knowing how to drive.

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They stop having options. They stop initiating. They hand the wheel back because the pattern is you've got it. Mom's in charge. Mom runs everything. And then on one particular day, maybe it's a moment when you're completely depleted and you really, really desperately need someone to step up. Maybe you're sick, or you need some downtime, or you've got an injury, or you're dealing with something else that's taken the top priority in your life, like planning an event.

You desperately need someone else to step up, and you look around and realize nobody knows how to take the wheel, not because they don't care, but because you've trained them to not to have to. The cost of control, friends, is that when you need a break from it, you're on your own. Okay, so if we can see these patterns, and I think most of us can see them, at least in hindsight Why don't we just change them?

And here's the honest answer, and I want you to hold this with compassion, not judgment, but the honest answer is that our brains are wired for three things. Our brains ultimately are wired to move towards pleasure, away from pain, and stay efficient. And patterns are efficient. They're the habit brain doing its job.

When I've done something the same way 100 times, like drive to the gym or brush my teeth, my brain stops really thinking about it, and it just runs the program, and running the program feels like autopilot, and it's energy conserving to the brain and body. It's not conscious. It's not a choice in the moment.

It's just what happens. And here's the other piece. Some of these patterns have a payoff, even the ones we don't like. The cave pattern pays off because the screaming stops. The repeat and escalate pattern pays off because eventually the shoes get on, and the control pattern pays off because things get done correctly and on time.

The payoff doesn't feel good, but it feels like a resolution, and a resolution, even a bad resolution, is the brain moving away from pain. The shoes get put on. The screaming stops. And remember, the brain is designed to move towards pleasure, away from pain, and be efficient. So what happens is we stay stuck, not because we're weak, not because we don't care, not because we don't know better, but because the brain is doing exactly what brains do.

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It stays in the pattern. And there's one more reason we stay stuck, and I think that's, this is the most important one of all. One of the biggest reasons that we stay stuck is we try to change the wrong person's pattern. When we don't like what's happening, including with our kids not putting their shoes on, our instinct is to focus on the other person.

Why won't my kid just listen? Why won't my kid just accept the consequence? Why won't my kid regulate? Why won't they just do the thing? We pour all our energy into trying to change their pattern, and here's the hard truth. You cannot change another person's pattern. You can only change your own. The person who wants the change has to recognize the pattern and then make the change, and when you make the change, when you shift your part of the pattern- The whole dynamic shifts with you, because the old pattern requires two people to play the roles, and when you stop playing yours, the pattern breaks.

Let me share with you a moment from my own house, because I think it's one thing to hear this concept, and it's another thing entirely to see it in action. Malcolm was about 15, and it was a regular afternoon. He had been home from school for over an hour, and he was sitting at the counter in the kitchen on his phone.

And one of his chores each day was to put the clean dishes away from the dishwasher before I started cooking. And we often had a battle about this. I mean, this had been going on for a few years. He knew this. He knew that I liked to have the dishes put away before I started making dinner. And I came in to the kitchen, I opened the dishwasher, I saw it was full, and I l- so I looked at him and I said, "Hey, can you put the dishes away?"

And my friend, he didn't even look up. He didn't even pause the scroll on the phone. He just said, "No." No explanation, no attitude, just no. And I want you to understand something. I teach this work. I've been doing this for 18 years. I breathe this work. I live this work. And in that moment, I was instantly, completely dysregulated.

I went from green to yellow to orange to red in seconds. Every part of me wanted to stay in that kitchen and just lose it on him, but I didn't. I turned around, I walked into my bedroom, and I closed the door. I took deep breaths, using the vagus nerve

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to tone down my amygdala. I walked around in circles. I felt myself coming, going down from red to orange to yellow.

I walked in circles, I'm not kidding, and I practiced out loud what I was gonna say to him when I went back out there. I was going to hold the limit without picking up the rope. I was in my bedroom maybe three to five minutes, and then I walked back out into the kitchen, and you know what was happening?

Malcolm was putting the dishes away. Now, what would have happened in the past is I would have stayed in the kitchen. I would have lectured him. I would have given him the whole rationale as to why I needed those dishes put away. I would have reminded him it was his job. I would have escalated the situation.

But this time, I decided to break the pattern and walk away, and I simply left the room. And in the absence of someone to struggle with, which was the pattern that we had created, he did the thing. And I'm gonna be completely honest with you. I remember the day like it was yesterday. I stood there completely stunned.

I also, in that moment, deeply understood something I'd only ever known intellectually before. He wasn't refusing in the past because he didn't want to do the chore. He was refusing because the struggle had become our pattern. The fight was the thing. By, by arguing with me as a strong-willed kid when I would ask or tell him to put the dishes away, the struggle that we would go back and forth would delay the chore, and his brain is motivated to delay the chore as long as possible, and I contributed to the pattern by participating in the struggle back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

But when I removed myself from it, when I broke my part of the pattern, he had nothing to push against. Less is more, and I have never felt that more clearly than I did in that kitchen. I understood the pattern, and I changed it. I continue to look at the patterns in my parenting to this day. The patterns that work, I keep, rinse and repeat, rinse and repeat, rinse and repeat.

Put them on automatic just like the nine steps to brush my teeth in the morning. I don't even have to think about it. I just get up and do it. So the patterns that work in my parenting, I put those on autopilot. The patterns that don't work, i.e., create

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conflict, create the pushback, or don't get me the results I want, I look at the pattern, and I think, "How can I change this?"

How can I change this with my actions, not demanding that he change it with his?" Okay. So maybe now you're thinking, "Well, that sounds great, Lisa, but what do I actually do?" Well, let's get into that. Let me help you with that, and I want to start by saying one pattern, not 10. You have to start with one pattern, not the whole operating system of your family, one pattern at a time because here's what I know about pattern change.

Okay, if I come to you and say, "Okay, we're gonna fix the morning routines, the afternoons, the bedtime routine, the screen time battle, the sibling fighting, and the homework avoidance all starting Monday," what would happen? Well- The truth is you'd be on fire for about four days, and then you'd crash hard.

Because you just asked your entire operating system, your nervous system, your habit brain, your emotional capacity, everything to change all at once, and that is not how humans work. It's like wanting to lose weight and deciding one day that you're gonna work out seven days a week, cut out all the sugar, drink a gallon of water, go to bed by 9:00, give up caffeine, not have any alcohol, et cetera.

You do it for about three days, and then you'll be on the couch eating cookies at midnight wondering what's wrong with you. Am I right? I know I've been there many times. And here's the thing, nothing is wrong with you. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. You just tried to change too much at once, and when we do that, the brain revolts.

So pick one. Pick the one that's causing the most friction right now. Pick the one that's draining you the most. Pick the easiest one maybe, and work on that one. Step one, you're gonna name the current pattern. That's the first step. Identify it. Name it. Not with judgment, just with clarity. What does the pattern actually look like from beginning to end?

And what do you do? And what do they do? And what do you do in response? Walk through the whole thing like you're watching it on, on camera or you're mapping out a process like you would at work. Because you cannot change what

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you cannot see clearly. So step one is just name it and map it out for yourself. Then step two is decide what the new pattern looks like.

Not what you wish would happen, but what is the actual new behavior you're gonna put in place. And here's the key. It has to be focused on your behavior, not your kids'. You are designing a new response, a new way to show up, a new way to request for yourself. Step three, write it down before the moment happens.

I cannot stress this enough, because here's what we know about the brain. Right now while you're listening, you're in your thinking brain. You're probably calm. You're most likely regulated. Maybe you're driving to work, taking a walk, or folding laundry, and right now you are in your higher brain, you're able to access logic and nuance and all the good intentions, right?

You're seeing everything I'm laying out for you, nodding your head even, maybe saying yes out loud. Okay, but on Tuesday morning when the shoes aren't on and you're already l- running late, and your kid is ignoring you, you will not be in your thinking brain. You will be in your middle brain, your emotional center.

And here's the thing about the emotional center. It cannot access the thinking brain. They cannot run at the same time. The emotional center is like the accelerator, and the thinking brain is like the brake. So all of this, everything you've learned today, everything you've decided you're gonna do differently, is completely unavailable in that moment in the beginning when you're trying to change a pattern, unless you've already written it down.

So what I want you to do is write the protocol. What am I going to do differently this time? What's the specific behavior I'm gonna try? Write it in the notes section of your phone. Write it step by step. First I'll do this, then I'll do that, then I'll respond this way, then I'll remember this, so that you can pull it up in the heat of the moment.

I would say treat it like a surgical checklist. You don't improvise in the operating room. You follow the protocol, and you follow the steps. And then step four is probably mo- the most important. Expect it to be imperfect. Yes, I said imperfect. Expect it. You're going to slip back into the old pattern. I still do sometimes.

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This is not failure. This is just how habit change works. The old pattern is the path of least resistance. The grooves and the ski tracks are deep, and your brain is gonna wanna take that because it knows it, and it's efficient. And when it does, all you need to do is notice, reset, and try again. The fact of the matter is, is that the first new pattern you establish from here is going to be the hardest.

It is. Which is why I often recommend pick something easy so you can be successful with it. But once you've broken through that one, once you've seen the pattern change, once you've felt what it's like when a different response leads to a different outcome, the second time, the second pattern is easier, and then the third one is easier, and then the fourth, and then they build on each other, and you learn how to do this and do it well.

Okay, let me share with you a story from one of our Hive families Christine joined the Hive completely at the end of her rope. Her eight-year-old, I'll call him Jake, would not get ready in the morning. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. I mean, for Christine, every single morning was a battle.

The shoes, the getting dressed, the picking the clothes, the brushing the teeth, the backpack, the breakfast, the water bottle. Christine would ask, remind, ask again, threaten, ask again, and eventually lose it entirely. And Jake would respond only when Christine reached that specific level, that exasperated, frustrated, yelling level, I really mean it, and then he'd move, and then he'd get ready, and they'd drive to school in silence, both of them wrecked.

The first time Christine got coaching within the Hive, she told me, "Lisa, I hate who I am in the mornings. I am not the mom I want to be. I can't look other moms in the eye at drop-off because I feel so bad about myself, but nothing else works than yelling at my kid. Yelling at Jake is the only thing that works," she said.

And here's what I said to her, "Something is working, Christine. That's the problem. The pattern works. Jake knows exactly when it's time to move. You're delivering the signal right on cue every single morning. This isn't a Jake problem. This isn't that he's being disrespectful or defiant or can't listen or doesn't love you or doesn't want to be successful.

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This is a pattern that both of you built together over the years." Tears filled Christine's eyes, and she took a big, deep breath, and she began to understand how she was creating the pattern. She, not Jake, she, the mom. So we started small. One change. Just one. Christine decided that she was going to give one clear ask in a way that I teach inside the Hive.

Just one, and then stop. No repeat, no warning spiral, no countdown, no screaming. Just ask Jake and then silence, and then there would be a natural consequence if it didn't happen. Now, I'm gonna be honest with you. If Christine were on this podcast right now, she would tell you that the first week was rough.

Jake pushed back hard against the new pattern. Hard. Because he was in a pattern of ignoring until he heard the signal, and he was waiting for the signal, the escalation, and it wasn't coming, and he didn't know what to do with the silence. So he tested her, and Christine held every day. She made a commitment to do this every day, and by week three, something started to shift.

Jake was moving earlier, not because Christine found magic words, but because the old pattern no longer worked. The signal wasn't coming, and Jake had to find a new way to operate. Christine told me something that I still think about She got on one day and she said, "Lisa, I haven't yelled in 11 days, and Jake got ready without me asking this morning."

Her face was just lit up with joy, and she said with a little emotion in her throat, "I didn't even know that was possible." Well, it is. And this is what happens when one person changes their part of the pattern. The whole pattern has to shift. It has to. It's how the human brain works. Now I want to speak to you as we close out this podcast episode.

If you're the parent who is sitting with this episode and feeling maybe a little bit uncomfortable and a little bit seen, maybe you're thinking, "Wow, Lisa, do you have a camera in my house? Am I Christine? How do you know this?" Well, here's what I know for sure. Every pattern you've built, you built it because it was the best you could do at the time, with your level of energy, your level of support, your level of nervous system regulation, your history, your exhaustion.

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You didn't build these patterns out of laziness or bad parenting or because you don't love your kid. You built them in the middle of real life. And here's the most important thing I want to say, and I really need you to let it land. If you built it, you can change it. You are not locked into this. Your child is not locked into this.

Patterns are not destiny. They're just habits, and all habits can be interrupted. They can be replaced. Not overnight, not perfectly, but steadily. And here's something I know from years of working with parents. The moment you start changing, you're a part of the pattern. The moment you respond slightly differently than you usually do, something in your child notices.

Their nervous system notices. The familiar script didn't play out the way it was supposed to or the way it has every time in the past, and that creates an opening. Change doesn't always look like progress in the beginning. Sometimes it looks like confusion or pushback or escalation because your kid is waiting for the pattern, the old pattern, to snap back in place.

Don't be discouraged by that. Stay with it, because what's happening underneath is real. One response at a time, you are changing the patterns in your family. This week, your job is simple. Pick one pattern. Write down what you're gonna do differently before the moment hits, while you're still in your thinking brain, and then try it.

That's it. One pattern, one protocol. And then come find me. Find me on Instagram or inside the Hive or on Facebook or on my website and tell me what pattern you're working on. Tell me what happened when you tried something different, because those messages, hearing from you, genuinely makes my week, and because this work is so much easier when you're not doing it alone.

And if you want support doing this with your specific kid, help notice your specific patterns inside your specific family, this is exactly what we do inside the Hive. Live coaching with a community of parents who get it, with real practical strategies for your real complicated life. Come join us at thehivecoaching.com.

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I would love to have you. 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 thepeacefulparent.com. See you soon.