Ep. #282: Why Your Kid “Doesn’t Listen” (And What’s Actually Happening in Their Brain)

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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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'm really excited to be with you today because what I'm sharing with you is something that I genuinely wish every single parent on the planet could hear. Before I dive in, let me say, if you haven't listened to episode 281, I wanna encourage you to go back and listen to that one first, because what I'm sharing today builds directly on what we talked about last week.

And together, these two episodes are gonna change how you see your kids' behavior completely. Last week, I told you that you've been training your kid not to listen, and I know some of you heard that and might have thought, "Okay, but why? Why don't they just hear me the first time? Why does it feel like I'm invisible in my own house?

Why do I have to raise my voice or say the same thing four times or completely lose it just to get a response?" Yeah, you probably thought those things, maybe more than once. I know I certainly did before I came to understand what I'm gonna share with you today So today I'm gonna answer those questions for you, and I promise you, once you understand what is actually happening in your kid's brain, you will never see their behavior the same way again.

Sound good? Okay, let's dive in. I wanna start by painting a picture of a very ordinary morning, because I think you're gonna recognize yourself in this immediately. It's 7:45 in the morning and you're making breakfast. You're also watching the clock, and you're mentally running through everything that needs to happen in the next 20 minutes.

Backpacks, lunches, permission slips. Did anyone brush their teeth? Where are the shoes? Why are there never any shoes? And somewhere in the middle of all that,

you call out across the house, "Get your shoes on." Nothing, no response. You hear no movement, no action. So again, you say, "Get your shoes on." Still nothing.

And now something in you starts to simmer, because how hard is it? You've said it twice. Why is this so difficult? And here's what I want y- to understand about that moment. I want you to really let this land, because it's gonna reframe everything. Your brain and your kid's brain are not operating the same way.

As adults, our prefrontal cortex is fully developed. Well, for most of us anyway. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain responsible for planning, organizing, anticipating, and managing multiple streams of information at the same time. It is why you can make breakfast, and watch the clock, and mentally prepare for school, and remember the p- permission slip all simultaneously.

That is your adult brain doing what adult brains can and do. Now, your kid's prefrontal cortex is not fully developed. It won't be fully developed until they are approximately 25 years old. 25, people. 25. So when your eight-year-old, or your 12-year-old, or your 16-year-old seems like they cannot hold more than one thought at a time, well, they can't.

Not because they're being difficult, not because they don't care, but because their brain is literally not built for it yet. We are asking single taskers, your kid, to respond like multitaskers, you, and then we're frustrated when they can't. Now, let me make this even more concrete, because I think understanding the mechanics of what's happening is what makes this reframe really stick.

When your child is in something or doing something, reading a book, playing a video game, daydreaming, watching TV Having a conversation with a friend, playing imaginary play. They are all the way in. Their entire brain is in that one thing. There is no background program running that monitors for parent commands, period.

There is no part of their brain quietly listening for their name, ready to snap to attention the moment you speak. They are just in the Lego, in the phone, in the Bluey TV program, in the imaginary play completely, 100% focused on that. And

when you call from the other room, "Get your shoes on," the message goes nowhere.

It's like sending a text to someone who left their phone in another room. They have no idea you sent it. They're not ignoring the text. They're not choosing to dismiss it They simply never received it. Now, here's where it gets really important because here's what we do in that moment. We take it personally as the parents.

We interpret the silence as disrespect, as defiance, as attitude. We tell ourselves this story, "They heard me, and they're choosing not to respond. They're doing this on purpose. They don't care." And that story, that story right there, is the story that gets us into trouble every single time because the moment we decide it's intentional, we respond to intention.

We come in hot. We escalate. We match what we think is their attitude with our own frustration, and suddenly we're in a battle that never needed to happen. The story we tell ourselves in that moment, "They're doing this on purpose," is the story that gets us into trouble. Now, here's what I know for sure after 18 years of parent coaching.

Your child is not out to get you. They're not manipulating you. They're not staging a tiny rebellion every morning over shoes. They are just deeply, completely, neurologically in their moment, and they need something more than a voice from another room to pull them out of it. Okay, now here's the part I really love because this is where everything connects, and if you listened to last week's episode, this is going to land in a very specific way.

I want to ask you a question, and I want you to really sit with it. Why does yelling work? Why does it work? Because it does work, doesn't it? When your voice hits a certain volume, a certain pitch, a certain urgency, your child moves. They look up, they respond, and the shoes go on. So why? Why, Lisa? Well, here's the answer.

Yelling is a pattern interrupter. Neurologically speaking, when a sound reaches a certain volume and intensity, it breaks through the single-task focus. It's loud enough and urgent enough and different enough from the background noise of daily life that it pulls your child out of their world and into yours.

This is why it works. Not because it's good parenting, not because fear is a great motivator long-term, but because it's neurologically effective at capturing attention. And here's the connection to last week because this is important. When yelling is the thing that consistently gets through, when it's the signal that finally lands, your child learns it's the cue, not the calm voice, not the first ask, not even the second or third.

The escalation, the volume, the shift in tone that says, "This is real, and it's happening now." Now, you train them that that is the signal, and I say that, I know you didn't train them on purpose or maliciously- But through pure repetition over hundreds of mornings, that pattern got built, and now here you are needing to yell to be heard because that's what the pattern requires.

Here's the most important thing I want you to hear in today's episode. Yelling works. That is the problem. Because as long as it works, there's no reason for the pattern to change. You'll keep using it because it gets results, and your kid will keep waiting for it because it's the signal they've learned, and the signal continues.

But here's what I want you to hold onto. Yelling is not, I repeat not, capital N, capital O, capital T, bold, circled, and underlined, yelling is not the only pattern interrupter. It is just the one you've been using, okay? Yelling is not the only pattern interrupter. It is just the one you've been using. And the good news is, once you understand that, you can start looking for a better one.

This is exactly the work we do inside the Hive, finding the better approach together for your specific child and your specific family It is not a one-size-fits-all. Now, before we get to the story that I want to share with you, I want to pause here and talk about what this reframe actually means for you, because I think there are two really important things that shift when you truly absorb this.

The first thing that shifts is the personal sting. When you understand that your kid's non-response is neurological and not intentional, when you really get that they are not choosing to dismiss you, they are just genuinely completely absorbed in what they're doing, the anger feels different. It doesn't disappear.

You might still be frustrated, but it's a different kind of frustration. It's not the hot, targeted frustration of, "I cannot believe you're doing this to me." It's more of, "They're just in their world, and they didn't hear me." That shift is everything because regulated parents make better decisions than dysregulated ones every single time.

The second thing that shifts is where you focus your energy. Right now, a lot of your energy is probably going towards trying to get your child to respond differently, to just listen, to just do the thing the first time, to just pay attention, and here's what this episode is showing you, that the work isn't about changing them.

The work is about changing the approach, specifically learning how to get genuine attention before you make any request at all. This is the whole game, friends. Attention first, request second. Once you have their genuine attention, not assumed attention, not hoped-for attention, but actual eyes up, ears on, brain present attention, everything changes.

The request lands. The follow-through happens. The shoes go on without the yelling. I want to share something with you from one of our Hive families because I think this story is gonna resonate with a lot of you. Michelle joined the Hive genuinely worried about her son. He was nine years old, and she started to wonder if something was wrong, not just behaviorally.

She was starting to wonder if he had some kind of attention issue because no matter what she said, no matter how many times she said it- He just didn't respond. She felt invisible, she felt unheard, and she was exhausted from fighting the same battles every single day. And I remember asking her one question.

I said, "Okay, tell me, Michelle, when you make a request of your son, where are you and where is he?" She thought about it for a second, and she said, "Well, I'm usually in the kitchen, and he's in his room." There it was. She had been calling requests through the walls for years, and her son, deeply focused, neurologically single-tasked, had genuinely never heard most of them, not once.

When I explained the brain development piece, the single task focused, the underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, the way his brain was just doing exactly what a

nine-year-old brain does, something in her visibly relaxed. Her entire face changed, and she said with tears in her eyes, "You mean he's not broken?"

And I said, "No, he's not broken. He's nine." The relief on her face in that moment is still something I think about because she had been carrying this weight, this worry, this story that something was wrong with her kid, when actually everything was exactly as it should be. He just needed a different approach from her.

So we spent time working on exactly that, the approach, and within two weeks she jumped on a Hive call, asked for coaching immediately, her face beaming. She told me that her mornings with her son had completely transformed, not because her son had changed, he was still the same nine-year-old, but because she had.

Her approach had changed. She was getting his attention before she made the request. And this, my real-world peaceful parent, is what happens when you stop fighting the kid and start working with the brain. Yeah? Yeah. Okay. Before we close, I want to give you one thing to do this week, and I want to be very specific about what I'm asking.

I'm not asking you to change anything yet. I know. I know that feels counterintuitive, but here's why. The awareness you build this week is gonna be the foundation for everything that comes next. You cannot change what you cannot see, and this week is your invitation to see it clearly. So your homework this week is to observe.

Every time you make a request of your kid or kids this week, I want you to notice three things. One, where are you when you're making the request? Are you in the same room? In another room? Are you making eye contact or are you calling over your shoulder? Okay, that's number one. Number two, do you have your kid's genuine attention before you speak?

Not assumed attention, but genuine attention. Are their eyes up? Do they acknowledge you? And then number three, what happens? Do they respond the first time? The second time? Do you escalate before they move? Just watch. Notice. Don't judge. Don't try to fix. W- when you notice, that awareness alone is going to change more than you think.

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And here's what I want you to walk away with today. Your kid is not broken. They're not defiant. They're not out to get you. I know it can feel that way, sometimes intensely, but they're not, I promise. Their brain is developing exactly on schedule, and that developing brain is doing exactly what developing brains do.

The frustration you have been feeling makes complete sense. I also want to acknowledge that for you as well. You've been expecting a multitasker and getting a single tasker every single time, and I know it's been hard. I get it. I was there. You've been working against the brain instead of with it, but that changes right now today.

Once you understand the biology, something shifts. You can stop taking that non-response personally. You stop interrupting the silence as attitude, and you start asking a different question. Not, "Why won't they listen to me?" but, "How do I actually get through to them?" That shift from why won't they listen to how do I actually get through to them is where everything changes, and that is the question worth sitting with this week.

So I want to invite you to come find me this week on Instagram. Leave me a DM. I'd love to have my DMs completely flooded with messages from parents. Tell me what you notice when you did your homework. Tell me how many times you made a request from another room. I want to hear from you, because those interactions genuinely make my week.

And if you want live support while you're doing this work, if you want to bring your specific situation to me and get real answers for your real family, well, that's what we do inside the Hive. So come join us at thehivecoaching.com. I would love to have you join us. You've got this, I know it, and I'll be with you every step of the way.

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.