

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About 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 thrilled to be with you today, and as we dig into today's episode, I want you to picture this with me. It's the middle of the afternoon in the middle of the summer, and nobody has anywhere to be. There's no homework, no packed lunch, no bus to catch, no teacher waiting.

The pressure's off, and yet your kid is lying face down on the kitchen floor because you handed them the blue cup instead of the green one, or they're screaming at their sibling over a toy they haven't touched since March, or they've slammed a door so hard the pictures rattled, and you're standing there thinking, "What on earth just happened?"

I mean, it's summer. They're supposed to be relaxed. Why is everyone melting down more?" Well, if you've been quietly wondering whether something is wrong with your kid, or with you, or with your whole house this summer, take a breath, because nothing is wrong. There's a reason this is happening, and once you can see it, you can do something about it, and that's what today's all about.

Now, if you've been with me for a while, you know one of my favorite ideas is the invisible emotional backpack. This is the idea that all day long our kids are filling up an invisible backpack with feelings they don't have words or skills to deal with yet. You know, like the hard moment at school, or the friend that was cold at recess, or the worksheet they had to do in 20 minutes that felt impossible, and our kids hold it together all day because school is not a safe enough place to fall apart.

And then when they walk through our door and the backpack comes flying off, that's the after-school meltdown. They have to unpack that backpack, and they're not falling apart at you, they're falling apart with you because you're their safe place. I say this all the time, and I know it sounds like a weird compliment, and

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About It)

they're demonstrating or they're complimenting you in the craziest of ways, but it's 100% true.

That's one of the most loved episodes I've ever made, episode number 32, The After School Meltdown is Real and Why It Happens. So if you wanna go have a listen to that, feel free. But here's the thing that's been on my mind and the reason I wanted to make this episode right now. It's because in North America it's summer and school is out, so you'd think that backpack would be empty, right?

Our kids should be loose and easy and calm as can be, and so many of you are telling me the exact opposite is happening. There's more storming, more fighting, shorter fuses, and so the backpack is clearly still filling up, just with different stuff, and today we're gonna figure out what's actually going on here.

And here's what makes the backpack so powerful. It shows you the meltdown before it ever hits. A backpack doesn't just fill up quickly, a backpack bulges. Think about it. The zipper strains, or it gets so stuffed we can't close it, and you can see it coming. The bulging is the warning that when one more thing gets crammed in, the blue cup instead of the green one, and the zipper bursts and everything explodes all over the kitchen floor.

That's the meltdown. The blue cup didn't cause it. The blue cup was just the last thing crammed into an already bursting backpack Say it with me, because this is the whole episode in one sentence. The thing your kid blew up about is almost never the thing your kid blew up about. It's just the last thing they crammed into an already bursting backpack.

Does that make sense? And before you tell me, "Lisa, that sounds nice, but you don't know my kid," oh, let me tell you about my kid, Malcolm. He was a full-contact sport from the time he turned three, and I was leading thousands of people at work and getting brought to my knees by a three-year-old every single night.

And if anyone's kid feels like the exception, it's mine. Hold on to him for me. I'm gonna come back to Malcolm at the end, because how this story turns out is the whole reason I do this work. So back to the invisible emotional backpack. Let's solve the mystery, the summer paradox, of why the backpack gets filled faster.

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About It)

Why does the backpack fill up more in the summer when the obvious stuff, school, tests, homework, getting up early, is gone? It feels backwards, I know, but once you see it, it'll help. Here's what summer takes away: rhythm. During the school year, our kids are being held by a structure. Predictability. They know what comes next.

Wake up, breakfast, school, lunch, home, snack, dinner, bath, bed. That predictability is not boring to a kid's nervous system, it's regulating. It's a banister they hold onto all day without even knowing it. In summer, summer rips the banister out. Some mornings they sleep till 10. Some days are packed with camp and a pool party and a late barbecue.

Some days have absolutely nothing in them at all. There's no anchor, and a kid without an anchor is a kid whose backpack fills up faster, because uncertainty itself is one more thing crammed in. Then add everything else summer stuffs in there. Sleep goes sideways, later bedtimes, lighter mornings, skipped naps for the little ones, and that alone drops a kid's tolerance through the floor, because a tired kid starts the day with a half-full backpack before anything even happens.

And boredom? Oh, ho, ho. Boredom, which we treat like it's nothing, but is actually really uncomfortable for kids who are used to constantly being busy and constantly entertained. Add overstimulation, the screens, the crowds, the heat, the travel, the schedule that changes every single day. Add the togetherness.

During the school year, siblings get a break from each other for seven hours a day. In the summer, they're on top of each other from sunup to sundown, and even kids who adore each other will storm when there's no relief valve. And here's one more thing almost nobody names: summer camp. We send our kids off to camp, and we think, "Great, they're having fun.

They're busy. The backpack must be empty." But camp is the new school. They're holding it together in a brand-new place with brand-new kids, with brand-new rules, with brand-new counselors all day long. They're packing the backpack the entire time. And when they come home, where does it all come out? With you.

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About It)

The after-camp meltdown is the after-school meltdown wearing sunscreen. So when your kid loses it at 4:00 on a random July afternoon, I want you to stop asking, "What is wrong with you?" and start asking, "What's in your backpack right now?" That single shift from judgment to curiosity changes everything. Get curious, not furious.

The behavior is just the stuff busting out, so our job as parents is to scuba dive down underneath it, and you'll almost always find a backpack that got filled up all day while you weren't looking. Now, I have to also tell you the part that nobody puts on a cute graphic on Instagram, because this isn't only about your kid's backpack.

You're carrying one, too, and in the summer, your own backpack is getting absolutely stuffed. Think about it. During the school year, you've got a few hours of breathing room. The house is quiet. You could work or think or just hear yourself for a minute or exercise regularly. In summer, that takes that away from you, too.

Now you're home all day. The noise is constant. The snack requests never end. The mess regenerates faster than you can clean it. You're refereeing fights. You're the cruise director, the chef, the chauffeur, and you've not had a complete thought to yourself since the first week of June. So your rhythm got ripped out right alongside theirs, and your backpack is bulging, too.

And here's the moment of truth I want to say with all love in my heart, because I've lived it. When your backpack is bursting and your kid's backpack is bursting at the same time, you've got what I've talked about before, a storming parent meeting a storming kid. Two overstuffed backpacks splitting open in the same kitchen at 5:00 PM.

And the yelling that comes out of you in that moment, that's not a character flaw. That's your zipper bursting. You're a human being whose backpack got too full and nobody helped unpack it, maybe for weeks. Now, I'm not telling you this to pile on the guilt. The opposite. I'm telling you because it means the fix is the same for both of you.

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About It)

You can't parent from a bursting backpack, so the job, regulate yourself first. Reset your nervous system. Get out of dysregulation. Because the truth is, you're the thermostat in your home, not the thermometer. So before we can help them unpack theirs, we have to learn to unpack ours. And here's the beautiful part.

When your kid watches you take things out of your own backpack Calmly, on purpose. You're teaching them exactly how to take things out of theirs. This, my real-world peaceful parent, is called co-regulation, and it's when your calm becomes their calm. So here's the good news, and it's really good news. The backpack is not the problem.

The backpack is supposed to fill up. That's just being a human. The skill we're building for them and us is unpacking it, is taking things out on purpose throughout the day So we're never walking around with a backpack that's busting at the seams. And this is the part I love because it's so much more doable than you might think.

You know how you unpack a real backpack? I mean, think about it. You don't wait for the zipper to explode. You open it up, literally, and you pull things out one at a time. The dirty sweatshirt from recess, the heavy textbook, the old water bottle that's been rolling around on the bottom for a week. You name it, you take it out, you make room.

Well, that's exactly what we're doing with the emotional backpack. Naming what's in there, helping it come out a little at a time, and making room. Let me give you the real world tools. Put a little rhythm back in. You don't need a color-coded schedule. You need two or three anchors a day that stay the same no matter what.

A slow breakfast together, a walk after lunch, chores before TV or electronics, the same wind down before bed. Those anchors are the banister summer took away. Predictability empties the backpack just by existing. I would actually add predictability and consistency. Next, think about front-loading the hard moments.

This is one of my favorite parenting tools. Before the pool, before the store, before you leave the house, tell them play by play. In ten minutes, we're leaving the pool, and I know it's hard. You can have one more jump, and then it's shoes on. You're not cramming a surprise into an already stuffed backpack.

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About It)

You're making room for the hard things before they get there. Next, build a daily unpacking ritual and name what you're taking out. This is the heart of it. Once a day, help them open the emotional backpack and pull something out, and name it. Sounds like the new kid at camp feeling is in there. Let's get that one out.

Then let it come out through your body. Rough and tumble play, a trampoline, a warm bath, dancing it out in the kitchen, a big hug. For an older kid, a run, time alone with the door shut, talking it out, music. These, these are tiny. We're talking five minutes. Magic isn't the size, it's the consistency. And a little unpacking every day beats a frantic cleanup after the explosion.

Next, make the backpack real. Get an actual backpack. Put a sweatshirt and a book and a water bottle in it, and stuff it until the zipper strains. And then show your kid or kids. See how this won't close? This is how your insides feel when too much piles up. Let's take some out. Kids who can see the backpack start to feel...

Kids who can see the backpack start to feel it filling, and that awareness is the beginning of them unpacking it themselves. It's the whole long game, and it's exactly how I grew Malcolm. And next, unpack your own backpack first. What about you? What's your five-minute unpack? The walk, the shower, 10 minutes on the porch before everyone's awake, the text to a friend who gets it, the deep breath before you open the car door.

You're allowed to take things out regularly out of your own backpack. It's not selfish, I promise. In fact, it's the most generous thing you can do, because a regulated you is the safe place your kids unpack into. Regulate first, then you have more to offer for co-regulation. And one more, because you won't always catch it in time.

Sometimes the zipper's already blown before you even walk in the room. When your kid is already storming, already bursting, there's really only one move that matters. Don't cram anything else in. Don't add your big feelings, your lecture, your frustration to a backpack that's already split wide open. Just stay the steady thing in the room and give it space to empty out.

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About It)

That right there is the move that took me years to learn, and it's the move that's changed everything with Malcolm. So earlier in the episode, I told you that Malcolm was a full contact sport from the age of three. Here's what I didn't tell you, the middle, because the middle is where most of you are living right now.

There were years, in his teenage years especially, when even my breathing irritated and dysregulated him. My breathing, for goodness sakes. And the storming stayed intense right through high school into leaving for college freshman year. Progress came in inches, not leaps. Some stretches better than others, some harder.

But I kept unpacking my invisible emotional backpack. I kept showing up as the most regulated person in the room that I could possibly be. I kept being the steady thing in the room, not perfectly, but consistently. And last month, I helped Malcolm move into his senior year apartment for college. It's hard to believe that we're here already, but here we are He's 21 now and getting ready to enter his senior year.

He needed a moving van to help move his stuff from his current place to his new place, and I booked the van for 7:00 in the morning, which was my first mistake. Let me tell you, my kid is 0% morning person. Zero. Half an hour in to trying to load this minivan in the heat in the middle of June in the Midwest of the United States, he's frustrated, he's short, he's acting like the defiant five-year-old that I remember, and he's taking it all out on me.

And in one particular moment, I looked over at him, and I could see his invisible emotional backpack bursting before the sun was all the way up. And here's what I did. I resisted the urge, and I mean there were urges. I resisted the urge to cram anything else in his backpack. Instead of matching his energy and trying to cram words and lectures and demanding into his backpack, instead I said, "Hey, Malcolm, you're in charge here.

This is your move. I'm just here to help. The one thing I know for sure is that we have to take the van back at 10:00. So put me to work however you want. I'm here to help. Otherwise, I'm just gonna stand over here and wait until you give me a job." And I walked away and stood over on the side. About 15 minutes later, he came over to me and he said, "Mom, I'm sorry.

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About It)

I'm being difficult. I'm projecting my frustration about getting up early onto you. I'm overwhelmed at how much work there is to do in a short amount of time." He said, "I recognize what I'm doing. I'm really sorry, and I won't do it for the rest of the day." And he didn't. I was so proud of him that day because I watched him unpack his own bulging, invisible emotional backpack He named exactly what was in it.

"I'm frustrated about the early morning. I'm overwhelmed about the short amount of time we have the van and the amount of stuff I have, and I'm taking it out on you." And he repaired, "I'm sorry, and I won't do it again." Now, n- none of us are born able to do this automatically. Kids are born able to feel every big emotion.

They're not born with the skills to handle them. Acquiring, developing, and learning the skills to handle the big emotions is learned over years. Years, and hopefully by watching us do it first. Someone has to model it for your kids, and I want it to be you. I realize that the little boy who used to explode on the kitchen floor over the wrong colored cup is now a young man who unpacks his own backpack in the middle of a stressful morning.

He still gets dysregulated sometimes, like when he has to get up early, or when we're under a real time constraint. And the truth is, we all get dysregulated from time to time, and that's exactly what happened. He got dysregulated that morning, and his invisible emotional backpack filled up very quickly and very intensely.

But he was able to see it- Repair, call himself out, course correct, and we had an amazing rest of the day together. That's the win, not a kid who never storms again, because we all storm from time to time. The win is a relationship that holds even when he does storm. The win is a kid who knows now, at 21, how to unpack that invisible emotional backpack, who knows how to name the big feelings and has the skills to manage them.

Let me share a story with you from one of the Hive members. Let's call her Megan. Megan came to a call in early June at the end of her rope. Her 13-year-old daughter, Maya, had been a different kid since school let out. Moody, snapping at everyone, slamming doors, in tears over things that seemed to come out of nowhere.

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About It)

Megan said on one of our weekly calls, "I don't understand it, Lisa. I really don't. We don't have any stress right now. I'm letting her sleep in. We're having her friends over. I mean, she should be happy this summer." So we got curious together, Megan and I, and we scuba dived down, and here's what we found in Maya's emotional invisible backpack.

First, she was staying up till 2:00 in the morning on her phone, and then she was sleeping till noon. Many of you know this scenario. So her whole rhythm was flipped upside down. The group chat never stopped buzzing. She was scrolling through everyone else's highlight reel all day. Her days had no shape to them and nothing to anchor her.

And on top of all that, the friend drama that comes with being 13 in the summer was real, and it was a big struggle for her in particular. So what Megan was able to see is that her daughter Maya's backpack was bursting, absolutely bursting, and she needed some help managing it all. There was no school to blame it on, so everyone, including Maya, just assumed she was being difficult.

Megan didn't fix Maya. She helped her unpack the backpack. They worked out a more human sleep window together, even though it was summer. They went back to taking the phone out of the room at night, and together they built one daily anchor. The two of them walked the dog after dinner. No phones, no distractions, sometimes talking, sometimes not.

Megan also front-loaded the hard transitions with Maya. She started helping her understand what the day held, where the hard transitions might be, and how they were gonna manage them together. And then Megan started taking her own 10 minutes in the morning before the house even woke up. So her own backpack wasn't already busting open when Maya came downstairs with sleepy hair and sleepy eyes.

Two weeks later, Megan came back and said, "It's not perfect, but the daily blowup is just gone. And Lisa, I've got my girl back. Thank you, thank you, thank you." Megan did the work. I was just there to support her. But these are the things that happen inside the hive. Progress, not perfection. That's the whole game.

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About It)

So I've got two assignments for you this week, and I really want you to do them because this is where the change actually happens. Number one, become a backpack detective. For the next few days, notice your family's overflow time, the hour of the day when the storms tend to hit. Then work backwards to name three things that could have quietly been crammed in before the moment.

Sleep, hunger, overstimulation, too much togetherness, camp transition. You don't have to fix anything yet. Just see what's going in the backpack, because awareness is the first tool. And then homework assignment number two, choose two unpacking rituals, one for your kid and one for you. Just one each.

Something tiny, five minutes that you can do every single day this week to take a little out before the zipper bursts. Maybe it's a trampoline session after camp for them. A quick cup of coffee on the porch. Can you tell I love sitting on the porch with coffee? I keep using it as an example. Do it on purpose before you need it, and then observe what happens at 5:00.

when you're doing or implementing the two unpacking rituals. Now, here's what I want you to know as we wrap up. You can absolutely start unpacking the backpack on your own this summer, and if you want someone in your corner looking at your real kid, your real summer, and your real 5:00 meltdown while helping you figure out exactly what's getting crammed in and exactly how to help you take it out, well, that's what the Hive is for.

Inside the Hive, I coach parents just like you up to three times a week live on the real stuff happening in your home right now. No curriculum, no homework, no falling behind. The replays are always there waiting for you. So if this feels like the moment this summer to get help unpacking your invisible emotional backpack and your kids', go to thehivecoaching.com and come join us.

I can't wait to work with you. So let's recap. Your kids' meltdowns this summer are almost never about the thing they melt down over. That's just the last thing crammed into an already bursting backpack. Summer fills the backpack faster than the school year because it rips out the rhythm and the rest and the breaks they use to keep it light.

Ep. #285: Why Your Kid Is Melting Down More This Summer (And What to Do About It)

The backpack is yours, too. A storming parent and a storming kid are just two overstuffed backpacks splitting open in one kitchen, and the skill for both of you is unpacking a little on purpose throughout the day before the zipper bursts. Rhythm, front loading, and a daily unpacking ritual while regulating yourself first are the tools you can use to unpack the backpack proactively.

And when it does burst, because it will occasionally, remember, don't cram anything else in. This is the recipe to raise a kid who will one day unpack his own backpack in the middle of his own big, hard, beautiful life, just like my Malcolm. You've got this. I know you do, 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.