

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host
Lisa Smith

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids

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 relieved to be with you today, and I mean that in the most specific way. Because what I'm about to share with you is something I genuinely wish I had known in the early years of my parenting. It would've saved me so much guilt, and I feel confident that today's episode is going to do the same for you.

I wanna start today with a moment, just one ordinary moment. I'm gonna describe it, and I want you to notice what happens in your body as I do. Your kid forgot their homework again. They're standing in the kitchen looking at you, and you can already see it on their face, the oops expression they perfected.

And something in you ignites, not a slow burn, an instant ignition. The thoughts are coming fast. Why does this keep happening? What does this mean? Is he always going to be this irresponsible? Will this affect her grades? What is her future gonna look like? Why won't they just do it? And before you even have a chance to think, you're in it, voice raised, lecturing, maybe threatening, saying things that you'll regret later tonight.

Yeah? Yeah. And if that's not bad enough, then the guilt hits. Because you know better. I mean, come on, you listen to this podcast. You know what you're supposed to do, so the question is, why does this keep happening? And the answer has almost nothing to do with your kid, which you might be like, "What, Lisa?

What you talking about?" Well, today I'm gonna explain what's actually happening in your brain in those moments, and the biology behind it, and why understanding this one thing might be the most freeing shift you ever make as a parent. So let's dive in. Okay, I want you to picture the smoke alarm in your home.

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids

The smoke alarm has one job, and one job only, and it's to detect danger, and it does the job without asking any questions. When it detects smoke, any smoke at all, it goes off, full alarm, full volume, every time, the same exact way. You with me? Now, the smoke alarm does not stop to investigate. It is not curious.

It does not ask, "Is it burnt toast? Did someone cook fish too long and it's smoking? Or is the house actually on fire?" Our current smoke alarms today are not designed for nuance. The smoke alarm's entire design is built around one principle: smell smoke, detect smoke, hit the alarm button at full volume.

Okay, you might be wondering, why are you talking about this, Lisa? Well, here's why. You have something in your brain that you might have heard me talk about before called the amygdala. The amygdala is a small almond-shaped structure in the middle of your brain, and the amygdala is your internal smoke alarm.

And just like the smoke alarm, your amygdala only has one job, one job and one job only, and it does it so well it's crazy. The job is to scan your environment for any threat and sound the alarm the moment it detects a threat. You with me? Okay. Now here's what makes this so important for parents. Your amygdala cannot tell the difference between your house being on fire or your kid refusing to hand over the gaming console.

Same alarm, same urgency, same neurological response. Because here's what your amygdala actually responds to. It doesn't just respond to physical danger, it responds to the unknown. It responds to uncertainty the moment you don't know what's going to happen next. And parenting, ho ho, ho. I mean, come on.

Parenting is an endless string of unknowns. An endless string of unknowns. Let me walk you through some scenes, and I want you to recognize yourself in these. Let's say your kid forgets their homework, and the unknown is, will he always be this irresponsible? Will it affect his grades? Will it affect his future?

Is he ever gonna develop a sense of accountability? That's the unknown. Here's another one. Let's say your kid refuses to hand over the iPad or the gaming console. The unknown is, is this an addiction? Am I letting this get out of control?

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids

What is this doing to their brain? Okay, next scenario. Your kid says, "I hate you" one day in the middle of a storm.

The unknown, have I damaged this relationship? Is this the beginning of the end? Do they really hate me? Did I do something that broke us? Another scenario, you find a wrapper of Oreo cookies or fruit roll-ups hidden in the couch cushions, and your kid has been sneaking food, you realize. The unknown, is there something going on I don't know about?

Is this a bigger issue? Do they have a food issue? Do they have a secret life? Why are they lying to me? Your daughter had a fight with her best friend, and she's been in her room crying for an hour. The unknown, will this friendship survive? Does she know how to keep relationships? Do people not like her?

Will she be lonely? Your kid got a bad grade, let's say. The unknown is, is this a pattern? Am I missing something? What does their future look like? Let's say your kid lied to you about something. The unknown becomes, is she someone I can't trust? Where does this go if I don't address it now? Does she have a lying problem? Now, I want you to notice what every one of these has in common.

None of them are actual emergencies in the moment, but your brain treats every single one of them like a fire. And it's not because it's a character flaw, and it's not that you're pessimistic or a bad parent. It's because this is your smoke alarm doing exactly what smoke alarms do, going off whether the toast is burnt or the house is on fire, because it cannot tell the difference.

Now, here's what happens next, and this is the piece I really want you to understand. This is the game changer. The moment your amygdala fires, it does something very specific. It hijacks your higher brain, your prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain that handles logic and nuance, perspective, problem-solving, and calm decision-making.

It literally takes that part of your brain offline. Not partially offline, but completely offline, because your brain has decided this is a survival situation, and survival situations don't need logic, they need action, or so your amygdala thinks. So your brain pushes you into one of four responses, and you might even recognize

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids

yourself in more than one, and you may rotate between them depending on the day, the person, or the circumstance.

But the four responses are fight, flight, freeze, and fawn. Fight is when the parent comes in hot, voice raised, lecturing, taking over, going to battle with the kid over forgotten homework, like the future of the family depends on the outcome of this conversation. The anger is real, palpable, but underneath the anger is fear.

The unknown lit the fuse. Flight is the parent who checks out, goes quiet, scrolls the phone, pours a glass of wine, does anything to get out of the discomfort of not knowing what to do. This looks like avoidance from the outside, but it's the same alarm. The brain just ran in a different direction. Then there's freeze, and this is the parent who goes completely blank.

The kid says, "I hate you," and they just stand there devastated, unwilling to respond, unable to access any of the tools that they know they have, frozen in the headlights of the unknown. This is not weakness. This is an overwhelmed nervous system doing what overwhelmed w- nervous systems do. And then the last response is fawn, and this is a sneaky one.

This is the parent who over-explains, over-apologizes, gives in to end the conflict, softens the limit because the alternative, the unknown outcome, feels too threatening. This parent keeps the peace by erasing themselves from the equation, and it works in the short term c- because the alarm stops, but then the pattern builds.

And here's what I want you to notice. None of these responses are bad parenting. None of these are moral failures. These are four ancient biological responses to the perception of threat. I wanna say that again. Fight, flight, fawn, and freeze are ancient biological responses to the perception, this is the key word here, to the perception of threat.

They were designed, these responses, back in caveman days. They were designed for a world where the threats were physical. Where the unknown, leaving the cave and venturing into new territory to forage for food, could actually get you killed. And the facts are that your brain is still running that ancient software.

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids

Your brain just didn't get the memo that the unknown is now, will my kid make the travel team, instead of, is there a lion behind the rock? And when the alarm goes off and one of these four responses take over, you are no longer parenting from your best self, from your higher brain. You're parenting from your most primitive self, and your kid feels every bit of it, and then you're modeling problem-solving from your most primitive self.

I wanna add one more layer here, and this one's personal. When your amygdala fires and you go into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn, it doesn't just affect you. It affects your kid. Because of something called co-regulation, our nervous systems are wired to sync up with the nervous system of the people around us.

It's why you feel calm around calm people and anxious around anxious people. It's not imagination. It's neuroscience. It's called mirroring, which means when your alarm goes off and dysregulation floods your body, eventually your kid's alarm goes off, too, and their amygdala responds to yours. And suddenly you don't have one dysregulated person in the room trying to manage a hard moment, you have two.

And I wanna be really transparent with you about this, because I lived it. When Malcolm was little, and even into his teen years, there were many times when my amygdala firing up would fire up his, and a lot of it had to do with my fears of the unknown. My fear about an unknown would become his dysregulation.

My fear of would we get there on time, would he be on the team he wanted to be on, would he be able to turn in his homework, would he be able to go to college even though he has dyslexia. My fears of the unknown would become his dysregulation. And ironically, I would stand there wondering why this moment had escalated so fast, not realizing that I had brought the match to the fire.

And I wasn't doing it on purpose. I was doing it because my smoke alarm was going off, and nobody had ever explained to me what was actually happening, that our brains are often triggered by the unknown, and that it often imagines the worst-case scenario and involves the amygdala when there's an unknown.

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids

And I'm telling you this now so you don't have to figure it out on your own. Your calm is not just good for you. Your calm is the single most powerful parenting tool you have. Let me say that again, because this is a hill I will absolutely die on. Your calm is the single most- most powerful parenting tool you have.

Because a regulated parent doesn't just manage the moment, a regulated parent changes the entire atmosphere of the room. You are the thermostat, meaning you have the ability to regulate, not the thermometer, meaning you're just reporting the temperature. Now, I wanna tell you how to handle this by talking about one of my mentors who doesn't even know he's my mentor.

But we're gonna talk about, for a moment, the great Viktor Frankl Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist who survived the Nazi concentration camps. And in the aftermath of that experience, having lost everything, including his entire family, he wrote something that has stayed with me for years.

"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In that growth lies our freedom." Between stimulus and response, there is a space. The stimulus is whatever your kid just did, didn't do, or said. The forgotten homework, the refusal to hand over the iPad, the I hate you, the food wrapper in the couch.

That is the thing that lit the smoke alarm. And the response is your reaction when the smoke alarm goes off. The space between them is where your power lives. And here's what I want you to understand about the space. It's not about being perfect. It's not about suppressing your feelings or pretending the alarm isn't going off.

The alarm is going off. The unknown is there. Will she grow up to be responsible? Is he addicted? Is she gonna have friends? Can they follow directions? Are we ever gonna get along? Do they really hate me? The unknown is there. Your brain is thinking those thoughts, for sure. And your biology is doing what it was designed to do.

But the freedom is in the pause, and the pause is gonna let you ask one question before you respond. Are you ready for it? The pause gives you an opportunity to

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids

ask yourself, is this burnt toast, or is the house actually on fire? Because the truth is, no matter how intense the moment feels, most of the time it's burnt toast.

And burnt toast does not require the same response as a burning house. And by asking yourself that question, that pause, that space, delineating between burnt toast and house on fire, is where you get the opportunity to bring your prefrontal cortex, your higher brain, back online. It's where logic and nuance and perspective become available to you again.

It's where you remember that this moment is not an emergency. It's where you can choose to be the thermostat instead of the thermometer. And here's what I also wanna say. The unknown is not gonna go away. Unfortunately, you're never gonna reach a point in parenting where you always know what's going to happen next.

I'm still experiencing this with a 21-year-old who's about to be a senior in college. Malcolm is interning this summer out of state, doing his own thing, building his own life. And there are moments where the unknown grabs me in a chokehold, and my amygdala starts firing just like it did when he was seven.

The scenarios are different, the stakes feel different, but the smoke alarm goes off all the same. Same loud, blaring, annoying noise. What has changed is this, I now recognize the physical sensation in my body the moment it happens. I know what it is. I know that it's more about me and the fear of the unknown than it is about Malcolm.

I know how to find the space before I respond, and I want that for you, too. I want to share a story from one of our Hive families, and I've changed some of the details to protect their privacy, but the pattern is real, and I see it constantly. Let's call this mom Sarah. Sarah joined the Hive frustrated, exhausted, and honestly, a little ashamed.

Her 11-year-old daughter had started lying to her, small lies about where she'd been after school, about homework being done when it wasn't. And every time Sarah found out, she would explode. Long lectures, raised voices, grounding, and then more lying. The cycle was escalating, and she couldn't figure out why.

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids

As we worked together inside the Hive, something became clear to me. Every time Sarah caught her daughter in a lie, her amygdala wasn't just responding to the lie itself, it was responding to the unknown underneath it. Sarah would tell me, "If she's lying to me about these small things, what is she lying to me about that I don't know?"

Which then led to, "What does this mean about who she's becoming?" The unknown would build and build and build, and to Sarah, it felt enormous and overwhelming and completely full of fear. Her smoke alarm was going off at full blast every single time. So Sarah, the mom, was going into fight every time with a child who was then going into flight, shutting down, becoming more secretive.

Two alarms feeding each other. Once inside the Hive, we worked on one thing first. Before Sarah addressed the lying with her daughter, I encouraged her, coached her, and guided her on how to address her own alarm. She had to find the space between the stimulus and the response. I helped her get regulated before she even opened her mouth, so she could converse with her daughter from her higher brain instead of her emotional center.

We talked about what that actually looked like. For Sarah, it was leaving the room for two minutes. It was texting a friend who would talk her down, and it was sometimes waiting until the next morning when everyone had had some sleep. The conversations she started having with her daughter were shorter, calmer, and more direct. She stopped lecturing and started asking questions like, "Help me understand what happened, and what were you afraid of would happen if you told me the truth?"

About a month later, Sarah got on one of our Hive calls, and she reported that her daughter had come to her and volunteered something, a small mistake she'd made, before Sarah had even found out about it. Sarah said, "Lisa, my daughter told me the truth before I even knew there was something to know. I don't think that's ever happened before."

Well, that, my friend, is what becomes possible when the smoke alarm stops running the whole show. And here's what I want to leave you with, and it's simple. This week, your homework is awareness, just awareness. No fixing, no

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids

performing, no perfect parenting. I want you to identify two or three unknowns that reliably trigger your alarm.

Not the surface behavior, but the unknown underneath it, the thing your brain is actually afraid of. When your kid doesn't listen, what's the unknown? When your kid struggles socially, what's the unknown? When your kid lies, what's the unknown? When there's conflict between the siblings, what's the unknown?

Name it. Write it down. And just for this week, when you feel the alarm go off, see if you can name what fired it up. Not to stop the alarm, but just to see it, because awareness is where everything starts. Because once you can name it, once you can say, "My smoke alarm just went off, and it's the unknown about my kid's friendships," you can create the space, the Viktor Frankl space.

And the space is where the power lives, because then you can ask the question, is this burnt toast or house on fire? And then you can answer or deal with it or coach it or parent around it from your higher brain, not your emotional center. And the truth is, most of the time, the house isn't on fire. It's burnt toast, and you get to decide what to do with that.

But I want you deciding that from your prefrontal cortex, your logical brain, not your emotional center. And here's what I need you to hear before we close. The moments when you lose it, when you lecture too long, when you go cold, when you give in when you know you shouldn't, when you stand there frozen not knowing what to say, those moments are not evidence of bad parenting.

They are evidence of you being a human being with a nervous system doing exactly what nervous systems do. Your biology is not a bug in a software. It's a feature that kept humans alive for thousands of years. You just inherited it for a context it was never designed for, current modern life. It's not about your kid.

It's about your biology, and your biology is workable. You're not doomed to react this way forever. The pause is available to you. The space is always there. And every single time you find it, even imperfectly, even a few seconds later than you wished you had, you're building something. You're building a nervous system that knows how to regulate, and that regulated nervous system is the most powerful

Ep. #286: The Real Reason You Keep Losing Your Cool With Your Kids

thing you can offer your kids and the most powerful thing they will ever learn from you.

Come find me on Instagram this week at The space Peaceful space Parent and tell me what your smoke alarm fired at. Tell me the unknown that was underneath it, because these messages genuinely make my week, and I want to hear from you. So again, your job this week is to ask, is it burnt toast, or is the house on fire?

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