

Ep. #287: Your Face Is Speaking: The Parenting Habit That Builds Lifelong Connection



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 absolutely delighted to be with you today, and I chose that word on purpose, delighted, because today's episode is all about one of the most powerful things you can do for your kids, and it has nothing to do with the right consequence, the perfect response, or having all the answers in a hard moment.

You're intrigued, aren't you? Well, it has to do with your face. Yes, your face. Uh, it makes me laugh just saying it like that. It has to do with your face and what your face says when your kids walk into the room. Stay with me. This one is going to land. I want to paint a picture for you. You're out in public, doesn't matter where, grocery store, a restaurant, a park, and you notice a parent with their kid.

Have a look. What do you see? Does the parent look irritated? Not yelling, not having a meltdown of their own, just tight, sighing, clip tone, eye roll, the I already told you that, the face that says very clearly, even without words, "You're annoying me right now." Well, I'm gonna be honest with you, I see this a lot of places when I go, and I'm not talking about dramatic moments.

I'm talking about the ordinary, everyday, constant low-grade frustration that so many parents can carry around like a second skin. It's almost invisible until you start noticing it, and then once you notice it, it's really hard to unsee it Now, here's what I want you to understand before I go any further.

I'm not judging those parents. I'm not standing up here on some high horse acting like I've never had that look on my own face, because I have. And the truth is, most of the time it has nothing or very little to do with our kids. It's the stress, the load, the mental tabs that never fully close, the slow burn of just trying to hold everything together, the things that are hard in life right now, the things that are heavy, the things that are unresolved.

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And all of that just sits there with us simmering, and then our kid does something totally normal. They spill something. They ask for one more thing. They argue about getting off screens, and all of that slow boil just spills right over onto them. I knew this about myself when Malcolm was little. I could feel it, the constant undercurrent of being on a low boil, and my frustration and irritation spilling out onto him.

It wasn't always the big moments. In fact, it was the little ones. It was my sighing, my short tone, and the way my face just wasn't happy to see him sometimes, even when he hadn't done anything wrong. And here's what I want you to sit with for a second. Your kid doesn't know it's not about them. They don't.

They just know what they see on your face. Let's talk about what actually happens to kids when they grow up on the receiving end of that low boil frustration. Not the dramatic yelling episodes, the quiet, daily, ordinary moments where the message their nervous system picks up is, "I'm too much. I'm a burden.

The people who love me- are most annoyed by me. Now, the truth is that kids are remarkably perceptive, even babies. Very young babies are reading facial expressions and responding to them. Don't believe me? Go watch clips on Instagram of moms with newborns. There's famous research called the still face experiment, where a mother who has been happily engaging with her infant suddenly goes still and expressionless, and within seconds, that baby is distressed.

They try to re-engage. They reach, they call out, and when the mom doesn't respond, the babies fall apart. Because what science tells us is that kids are wired to read us. Their safety depends on it. They're doing it constantly, scanning, monitoring, looking for cues from us, whether they're safe, whether they're loved, whether they belong.

And that doesn't stop when they learn to walk. It doesn't stop when they start school. A nine-year-old is doing it. A 14-year-old is doing it. They're just better at pretending they don't care. So when the baseline in a home is frustration and irritation, when a kid has internalized over the years of small daily moments that their presence is a bother, they don't think, "My parent is stressed."

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They think at a really deep, wordless level, "Something is wrong with me. It's me. I'm the problem," to quote T-Swift. And here's the really important part The belief doesn't stay quiet. It shows up as behavior on our kid's part. It might show up as defiance because, I mean, let's face it, if I'm really the problem, why bother trying?

It shows up as shutting down. It shows up sometimes as not talking, as checking out. It shows up as the very behaviors that create more frustration, which creates more of that irritated, tight-faced baseline from you, and the whole cycle just keeps going. I've lived on the other side of this. I grew up in a home where that low boil irritation was the norm, and I know from the inside out what it does to a kid and an adult.

I knew even before I understood the research, even before I had the language for it, that this was the cycle I most desperately wanted to break with Malcolm, not just the yelling. The yelling was the more visible part, but underneath the yelling was that constant undercurrent of annoyance and frustration.

That look that said to him, "You're too much." This is what I wanted to change, and then I found the research and everything clicked. And I want to clear something up because there's a misconception I see all the time when parents start learning about attachment. Secure attachment does not mean perfect parenting, and I want you to hear that clearly.

Secure attachment is not about never losing your cool. It's not about having the right response every single time. It's not about being endlessly patient, endlessly cheerful, endlessly regulated every moment of every day. That's not it. Not one bit. What secure attachment actually means, and here I'm drawing from the work of researchers like Mary Ainsworth, John Bowlby, and more recently, Doctors Tina Payne Bryson and Dan Siegel.

What it actually means is this. Your kid knows at the deepest level that you are the safe place, that they belong with you unconditionally, that your love for them is not conditional on their behavior, that after a hard moment, after a mistake, after a meltdown, yours or theirs, you are still there and nothing changes that.

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Nothing. And woven through all that research, there is one element that I don't think gets nearly enough attention. One element that I believe is the secret ingredient in building that foundation. Are you ready? It's delight. Not just love, not just safety, but delight. When your kid knows that you delight in them, that you genuinely enjoy who they are, that your face lights up when they walk into a room, something shifts in them at a deeper level than words.

Their own sense of worth deepens. Their trust in you strengthens. The safety of the relationship grows. They don't just know that they are loved. They know that they are enjoyed by you. They know that they bring something good into the world by just being themselves, and that is the foundation we are working so hard to build.

And here's the flip side. When delight is absent, when the baseline is frustration and irritation all the time, that absence gets internalized too just as powerfully, just as quietly, and it shapes kids in ways we never intended. Let me share with you a decision I made when Malcolm was about four or five years old.

I was doing my own work at the time, breaking cycles and creating transformations in my own family. I was reading and learning and starting to understand the parent I wanted to be versus the parent I currently was at the time. And somewhere in the process, I made a commitment to myself and to Malcolm. I decided that every single time I saw him, every time he walked into the room, every time I picked him up from school or an activity, every time he came to find me, I was going to greet him with joy.

A genuine smile, real eye contact, and my face actually lighting up when I saw him. Simple, right? In theory, yes, it sounds simple. In practice, it was one of the hardest things I've ever committed to. Because here's what happens. You make the commitment, and then your kid walks in right after you've asked them for the fourth time to do something, and they still haven't done it, or they come find you in the middle of you doing something really important, or they did something earlier in the day that you're still frustrated about, and in that moment, your face wants to do the thing it's always done, tighten up, go neutral, and show the irritation.

So I had to consciously choose something different. And there were real moments, hard moments, where Malcolm had made a mistake, where I was frustrated with

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him, where we were heading into a conversation I didn't wanna have. And through it all, I held the commitment. I greeted him with warmth And love in my eyes, even when I also needed to address something difficult.

Because those two things are not opposites. You can hold a limit and lead with love at the same time. You can address a behavior and make sure your kid knows before and after that your love for them is never, ever, ever on the table to be taken away when they mess up. What I discovered is that this one commitment, this one simple, yet incredibly hard commitment, changed the entire texture of our relationship.

It changed how he came to me. It changed how he responded when things got hard. It changed what was possible between us. Because when a kid knows your delight in them is real and consistent, even on the days they mess up, even on the days when they're difficult, the relationship becomes a safe place. And a kid who feels safe with you is a completely different kid to parent.

Now, let me get practical with you because, I mean, this is Real World Peaceful Parenting, and that means we don't just talk about what's possible, we talk about how to actually do it. Here's where I want you to start. It's simple, though it may not be easy. Start with the face check. Just begin to notice, not to judge yourself, just to see.

When your kids walk into the room, what does your face do? Not the big dramatic moments, the ordinary ones, the Tuesday afternoon moment, the before school moment, the random Wednesday evening when they come find you. What does your face say to them? For a lot of parents, especially parents of strong-willed kids who've been in the trenches for a while, the default face has kind of hardened.

It's not unkind, it's just braced, a little guarded, a little tired, ready for the next thing. And that face is broadcasting something to your kid every single day, even when you're not saying a word. So awareness is step one, and I want you to just start seeing it, okay? And I want to share something from inside the Hive.

I've changed some details to protect the parents' privacy, so let's call this mom Claire. Claire came to me because her 12-year-old son had become increasingly

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distant and difficult to connect with. He didn't want to talk. He shut himself in his room. And she joined the Hive because she felt like she was losing him.

And when we really dug into what was happening day to day, something emerged that surprised Claire. Claire wasn't yelling at her kid. She wasn't being harsh or critical, but she was exhausted, deeply exhausted. And her son had been absorbing that exhaustion for years. Every little sigh, every tensed silence, every time she was visibly annoyed by a completely normal kid comment.

Her son had been reading it all. And he had decided without ever putting it into words that his presence was a problem for her. Now, when Claire made the shift, really committed to it Even imperfectly, even on the hard days, the shift to delight in her son, he started to open up. Not overnight, but gradually and steadily.

He started lingering in the kitchen. He started initiating conversations again, because his nervous system had started to relax. He wasn't bracing for the irritated face anymore, and he began to feel safe. And that, my friend, is the power of this. It's quiet, it's consistent, and it compounds over time in the most beautiful way.

So here's what I want you to take away from today and put into practice this week. Two things. First, the face check. Once a day, just catch yourself in an ordinary moment with your kid or kids and notice, what is my face broadcasting right now? You don't have to fix it yet, just see it. Awareness is always step one.

Second, make one moment of genuine delight visible each day. Not performed, not forced, real. What's one thing you truly enjoy about this kid? What's one thing that makes you glad they're yours? Find that, and share that with them. Let them see it on your face. Say it out loud for extra bonus credit. And if you're in a season right now where genuine delight feels really far away, because maybe things have been very hard, maybe the relationship is strained, maybe you're dealing with other complicated, difficult relationships, or you're running on empty, then I want you to give yourself a smaller, more achievable goal.

Aim for neutral. Not warm yet, just not tight. No sighing, no bracing. Neutral is a bridge, and neutral is worth everything right now if that's all you've got to give. As I said earlier, this is the work. It's simple, and it's not easy, and it is some of the

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most important work you will ever do, ever. And if today's episode resonated with you, if you found yourself recognizing that low boil, that tight face, and you want to make this shift like I did, but you know you can't do it alone, well, then come join us in the Hive.

The Hive is my coaching membership community where we do this work together every single week. Three live group calls every week where I work with real parents on real moments with their real kids. And this is exactly the kind of thing we go deep on, the patterns we're running without realizing it, what gets in the way of being the parent you want to be, and how to actually change it step by step.

It's \$37 a month. You can cancel anytime, and you will never, ever be behind. Every call is recorded, and every replay is yours to access whenever you need it. Come find us at thehivecoaching.com. I'd love to see you there. 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.