

Ep. #288: Stop Trying to Make Your Kid Feel Better



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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 mean that. Because today we're talking about something that I think is one of the most important and most overlooked pieces of this whole peaceful parenting journey, and it starts with a question that might stop you in your tracks.

Are you ready? What if one of the biggest mistakes we are making as parents is believing that our job is to make our kids feel better? What if the goal isn't happiness? What if the goal isn't preventing sadness or anxiety or disappointment or heartbreak or rejection? What if, stay with me here, what if the goal is raising a kid who learns, "I can feel hard things and still be okay"?

Well, that, my friend, is what today is about. And I want to be really clear up front, because this episode is not primarily about your kid. No, it's about you. It's about us. It's about why we rush to fix- Why we can't seem to just sit there when our kids are hurting, and what is actually happening inside of us when they storm.

That's where the gold is. So let's dig in. Now, here's the truth most parenting content skips right over. Most of us aren't struggling because our kid is upset. Most of us are struggling because our kid's upset activates us. Let me say that again. Most parents don't struggle because their kid is upset.

They struggle because their kid's upset activates them. It's not that our kid's feelings are the problem, it's what our kid's feelings do to us. Let me explain. Your kid starts to cry at any age, and something in your body immediately tightens. Your kid says, "I hate you," or, "I have no friends," or, "I'm the worst at everything."

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And before you've even had a conscious thought, you're in motion. You're reassuring. You're problem-solving. You're listing every reason why they're wrong. You're offering silver linings. You're distracting. You're doing anything and everything to make the feelings stop, and it probably looks like love, and it probably feels like love, especially if you didn't have that kind of love as a kid.

But here's what it's actually communicating to your kid underneath all of it. We're saying to our kids, "These feelings are too much. You can't handle this as the parent, and we need to make this feeling go away immediately." That is the message. Not the words, but the message underneath the words. In my work, I call this the rescuing zone.

It's when we over-function, when we do for our kids what they actually need to learn to do for themselves, and it doesn't just happen with tasks and chores. It happens with feelings. We're often rescuing our kids from their emotions just as reflexively as we might rush to pick them up when they fall. And the hard question I want us to ask ourselves as the parents is, who are we actually rescuing?

Who are we actually rescuing? So let me offer a reframe that I want you to sit with. Emotional discomfort is not the same as danger. Say that to yourself. Discomfort is not danger. Sadness is painful. Loneliness is painful. Disappointment, heartbreak, grief, anxiety, all of it's painful. But painful is not the same as dangerous.

And somewhere along the way, a lot of us started treating our kids' emotional pain like it was a crisis that needed to be solved immediately. Think about what happens when a kid goes through something hard. A friendship ends, they don't make the team, they fail the test, they find out they didn't get invited to a birthday party, they feel left out.

Those are real losses, real pain. And what do we do? Well, we often rush in. We rush, we minimize, we reframe. You'll make new friends. You'll get it next time. At least you blah, blah, blah. We're so uncomfortable with their discomfort that we simply cannot be present for it. I love an image that I came across recently.

Think of it like a valley, and when a kid does something hard, they have to go down into the dip. That's the struggle, the hard feeling, the hard moment. That's the

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valley. And resilience, resilience is built at the bottom of the valley. It's built by going across the valley and coming out the other side.

But when we rush in to fix it, when we pull them over the top and bypass the dip entirely, the valley floor, we rob them of the very experience that would have built something in them. The message we're trying to send is, "I love you. I've got you." Unfortunately, many times the message they actually receive is, "You can't handle this," which means the next time something hard comes, they won't believe they can handle it either because they never got the chance to find out.

Resilience develops through supported struggle, not the absence of struggle. You've gotta go across the valley floor to build that resilience. And I wanna be clear about what I'm not saying. I'm not saying you let your kids struggle alone. I'm not saying that you're cold and distant and withholding. That is not this.

What I am saying is that there is a world of difference between being a warm, steady, regulated presence beside your kid while they feel something hard versus frantically trying to make the hard feeling stop immediately. One says, "I am here, and you are safe, and this feeling is survivable." And the other says, "This feeling is too big, and we need to get rid of it right now at all cost."

Resilience is not a kid who never feels sad, never feels anxious, never falls apart. That is not resilience, my friend. Resilience is a kid who has learned from experience three things: I can tolerate this, I will survive this, and this feeling will pass. And they only learn those three things by actually going through hard feelings across the valley floor with you as their anchor.

Not their rescuer, their anchor. That's the goal. That is what we're building towards, you being the anchor, right? Okay, so now I wanna get to the heart of it, because here's the insight that I think changes everything. You ready? Okay. Most of us are trying to rescue our kids from the feelings we ourselves haven't yet learned to tolerate.

Let me say that again. Most of us are rushing in to be the rescuer because we are trying to rescue our kids from feelings we haven't yet learned to tolerate ourselves.

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This is not primarily a parenting problem. It is a personal history problem. And I know this because I lived it. I grew up in a home where feelings were not okay.

Not in a dramatic, obvious, just in the quiet, constant way of a household where emotions were uncomfortable, inconvenient, and something to be managed, pushed past, or ignored, especially my emotions. Nobody sat with me and my feelings. Nobody ever said, "That makes sense," or, "I know this hurts," and then just stayed.

What I learned without anyone ever saying the words was that feelings are too much, especially my feelings, and that when something hurts, you find a way to make it stop immediately. That discomfort is not something you sit with and learn from. It was something to be escaped from. And I carried that into my parenting in the beginning.

So when Malcolm was sad or scared or frustrated or hurt, my nervous system, ho ho ho, could not hold it. Not because I didn't love him, but because I hadn't learned to hold it on my own. I'd spent my whole life learning that feelings were something to manage and move past, not something to be present with or for.

So when his feelings showed up big and real in front of me, everything in me wanted to make them go away or stop. Not for him, but for me. And that's the truth I want you to hold today. When you rush in to fix your kid's feelings, when you can't sit still while they cry, when you can't feel the frantic urge to make it better, when the silver linings come out before they've even finished telling you what happened, that's your clue.

That's your tell. And I want you to get curious, not furious, with yourself first. I want you to ask Whose feelings am I actually managing right now? Because the work of becoming a parent who can hold space for a kid's big emotions, well, it starts with becoming a person who can hold space for your own big emotions.

Make sense? All right, so here's the practical pivot. Two questions, one you're probably asking and one I want you to start asking instead. The question most parents are asking is, "How do I make my kid feel better?" The question I want you to ask in the future is, "How do I help my kid feel safe while feeling this?"

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That single shift changes everything about how you show up in these moments, because the first question puts you in problem-solving mode. It makes the feeling the problem. It makes your job to eliminate the feeling. Now, the second question, "How do I help my kid feel safe while feeling this?" it makes your job to be the steady presence, the anchor, the person who communicates with or without words, "You're not alone in this, and you're going to be okay."

Make sense? Okay, so maybe you're asking, "Lisa, what does this actually look like?" Well, it looks like staying in the room instead of jumping to fix. It might look like putting your phone down and turning towards them and letting there be silence instead of rushing to fill the gap with reassurance. It might look like saying, "This makes sense."

I can understand how you feel this way," instead of, "But here's the good news." It might look like saying, "I know this hurts, and I know you can handle it," instead of, "Don't worry, it'll be fine," or, "You'll be fine." And sometimes, sometimes it might look like saying nothing at all, just sitting close and being there.

I like to say presence over problem-solving every time until the kid is ready for the problem-solving. Presence over problem-solving first. And I want to share something from inside the hive. I've changed some of the details to protect this mom's privacy, but let's call her Meg. Meg came to me because their eight-year-old daughter had started shutting down whenever something hard happened.

She'd go quiet, she'd go to her room, and she'd refuse to talk And Meg couldn't figure out why her daughter wouldn't come to her. She was really baffled and confused and frustrated. So she joined the Hive, and we dug into what happened in those moments, and a pattern emerged. Every time her daughter came to Meg upset, Meg would immediately go into fix-it mode.

She would explain and problem solve and reframe and explain some more. She would say things like, "Here's what you should do," before her daughter had even finished talking. Now, it was well-intentioned. I mean, Meg really loves her daughter, so I know that it was totally well-intentioned. It was also sending a message to her daughter, loud and clear, that her daughter's feelings were too much for the mom.

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The mom, Meg, couldn't just be with her daughter during the big feelings moments. So what happened? Well, it's exactly what happens in many homes. Her daughter stopped bringing the problems to Meg. And when Meg made the shift, when she started practicing presence first before problem solving, validation before advice, with things like, "That makes sense," before, "Here's what you should do," her daughter started coming back slowly.

Tentatively at first, and then more. Because she had learned that Meg is a safe place to share her feelings. My mom can hold this, and I don't have to go through it alone. That is the relationship we are all trying to build with our kids. I know it is, or you wouldn't be here listening to this podcast. And it starts with us doing our own work.

So two homework items for this week, and I actually want you to do these. First, the next time your kid comes to you upset about something, notice whether or not the impulse is there to fix it. Just notice it. You don't have to act on it. Don't reach for the silver lining. Don't problem solve. Just stay. You might even say, "That makes sense," or, "I hear you."

And see what happens next when you simply let the feelings be there. Second homework assignment is to ask yourself honestly, what feelings am I uncomfortable sitting with in myself? What feelings? Am I uncomfortable with sadness, loneliness, failure, rejection? Because wherever your own tolerance is low, that's exactly where you'll struggle to hold space for your kid or kids.

That awareness is not a judgment, it's a map, and it can tell you exactly where your own work is. Make sense? The goal isn't to raise kids who never feel sad. The goal is to raise kids who know I am safe even when life hurts, and I can trust myself to move through hard things, and my parents are here to help me.

And that, my friend, starts with you believing it first. Yeah? Awesome. Okay. 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.