

Ep. #289: The 90 Seconds Between You and the Parent You Want to Be



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 so thrilled to be with you today. Today we're gonna pick up exactly where we left off last week, and if you haven't listened to episode 288 yet, let me give you a quick little recap. Last week we talked about why parents rush in to fix their kids' feelings, mistakes, and big emotions.

And the heart of it, the real reason underneath all of it, is that we haven't learned to tolerate our own discomfort, so we fix theirs, their big emotions, to make our discomfort go away. And at the end of the episode, I left a question hanging in the air, a question I know many of you were asking, and I know this because you reached out to me.

And you said, "Okay, Lisa, but how? How do I actually do that? How do I sit with something uncomfortable without acting on it, without exploding, without handing it to someone else, without solving it?" Well, that, my friend, is what today's episode is all about. And I wanna begin today by asking you something.

How many feelings do you think you actually know or have experienced? Not feelings you've heard of, feelings you can name when you're in the middle of them, feelings you can find in your body and say, "Yes, that's what that is." I want you to sit with this question for a moment, because we're gonna come back to it a little later in today's episode.

Now, here's something I want you to know about me. When I was going through parent coach training, which was 18 years ago, it's hard to believe I've been doing this that long, but I have. When I went through parent coach training, I was handed, as part of the curriculum, something called a feelings wheel, and the truth is, it was the first time I'd ever laid eyes on this thing called the feelings wheel.

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And I remember looking at it and just stopping dead in my tracks. A feelings wheel is exactly what it sounds like. It's a wheel, round, and it's covered in feelings, dozens and dozens of them, feelings broken down by category, by intensity, and by layer. Feelings I had never seen written down before.

Feelings I didn't even know counted as feelings appeared on this feelings wheel. And I realized, looking at this wheel, that I could count on one hand the feelings I actually knew how to name when I was in the middle of them. Here's the list. You ready? Mad, sad, happy, and frustrated. That was pretty much it.

Four feelings. For a smart, successful adult who really considered herself in touch with herself and others, four feelings. Four. And I was training to help other parents with their emotions. I want you to feel the irony of that for a second. And here's the thing, I was not an unfeeling person. I had plenty of feelings.

I just hasn't, hadn't, I just hadn't been taught what they were, what to call them, or d- what to do with them when they showed up. Because the model I was handed, the operating system I grew up with, didn't include any of that. Here's what was modeled to me and for me. Here's what I absorbed growing up without anyone ever spelling it out.

One, you have a negative feeling. Two, you project it onto someone else. Three, you make it their problem. Four, you get rid of it. Or five, you demand a solution. That was the system. Not sit with it. Not feel it. Not name it or get curious about it. It was get it out, get it gone, make it go away, and make it someone else's job to fix it.

Sound familiar? I'm guessing that might hit a little close to home, and you might think that I'm telling your story right now instead of mine. And here's what I want you to hear. This wasn't some unique failure on the part of my family. This was, and still is, often the default setting for many of us. We weren't taught to sit with feelings because our parents weren't taught to sit with feelings, and their parents weren't either.

This is how emotional avoidance gets handed down, not with words, but with behavior, with the unspoken lesson that uncomfortable feelings are things to be

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managed, minimized, projected, or quickly resolved. And then we grow up and we have kids, and our kids have big feelings. And if your kids are anything like mine, loud feelings.

Inconvenient, enormous, right in the middle of something like dinner feelings. And something in us just can't hold it, because nobody ever taught us how to hold our own feelings. Now here's something I want to clear up before we go any further. Because when I say sit with your feelings, I imagine here's what some of you might be picturing.

You're picturing suppression, white-knuckling it, stuffing it down, ignoring it, slapping a smile on your face and pretending everything is fine while something is boiling underneath. Please let me be crystal clear. That is not, capital N, capital O, capital T, bolded, underlined, and highlighted, this is not what I'm talking about in today's episode.

In fact, it's the opposite of what I'm talking about. I want you to picture a beach ball. If you drop a beach ball on the surface of the water in a pool, it just floats. It bobs around. It's there, but it's not causing any chaos. You can see it, you can acknowledge it, and it's just sitting on top of the water floating around.

Can you picture that? Okay. Now, take the same beach ball and push it underwater. Hold it down. Use all your energy to keep it submerged. Can you picture that? Okay, two things happen. First, every bit of your attention goes to holding it underwater, and you're, you're focused. In fact, you can't focus on anything else but holding the beach ball down.

You're essentially white-knuckling it. And here's the thing. The second you let go, and eventually you will let go, right? You get tired, or you get startled, or you can't hold it anymore, or you get bored, and you let go, the beach ball comes rocketing up to the surface with more force and more velocity and more mess than if you just let it float in the first place.

Can you picture that? Okay, that, my friend, that is suppression. Suppression is like holding the beach ball down underwater. It is not sitting with your feelings.

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Suppression is the five-step system I grew up with, just wearing a quieter mask. Now, sitting with your feelings is letting the beach ball float at the surface.

You see it. You acknowledge it's there. You don't pretend it doesn't exist. You don't grab it, hurl it at someone either. You just let it be on the surface where you can see it until it's ready to move on. That's the distinction, and it matters enormously. Enormously. Can you see that? So then the question is, I see it, Lisa, but why is this so hard?

Well, it's hard because your body doesn't want to just let the beach ball float. That's not the environment you grew up in. Your body reads a big emotion as a threat. When your nervous system senses a threat, it wants to act. We've talked about this before. It wants to fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. It just wants to get into some kind of action to save your life.

And the urge to act on a feeling, to project it, to discharge it, to solve it, it isn't weakness, it's biology. Your nervous system is doing exactly what it was designed to do. And on top of that, most of us have decades of practicing running the five-step system. Decades. It's automatic. There's deep grooves in the neuropathways, and by the time you've noticed you're activated, the response is already halfway out the door.

So here's the question everyone asks at this point: If my body is fighting it, Lisa, my history is fighting it, and the whole thing is automatic, how on earth do I interrupt that? How do I change it? How do I learn to sit with it, and how long does it take? Well, before I answer that, I want to give you something, a definition that changed how I understood all of this.

I define a feeling as a vibration in the body caused by a thought. Now, that's not the only way feelings show up. Truthfully, some emotional responses happen before we've even formed a conscious thought. But as a working definition, especially for this work we're doing, it's the most useful one I'm found, because it reminds us that we have more agency over our feelings than we think.

If a feeling is caused by a thought or kept alive by a thought, then we have a role to play in what happens next, okay? I want you to hold onto that because it connects

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directly with what I'm about to tell you. When I ask people, parents, coaches, anyone, how long they think an emotion actually lasts in the body...

Well, you tell me, how long would you guess an emotion lasts in your body? Well, most people say five minutes, 10, an hour, the rest of the day. But guess what the answer is. Are you ready for this? 90 seconds. Here's the neuroscience. Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a brain scientist, not a parenting coach, found that an emotional wave in the nervous system takes about 90 seconds to peak and begin to pass.

90 seconds, a minute and a half. Wow, right? I know. Every time I share this with someone, they just look at me like, "Oh my goodness. That's amazing." Now here's the catch. That's 90 seconds if you don't refuel it, if you don't layer a story on top of it, if you don't start thinking about what this means, why it always happens to you, what they should've done differently, how this is going to affect everything, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Because the moment you do that- You're not riding the 90-second wave. You're generating a new one. You're refueling and generating a new wave. Make sense? Okay, so here's the important question. But what if you could just be with that wave for 90 seconds, the wave being the feeling, whatever it is, disappointment, frustration, anger, irritation, feeling left out, confused, unsure.

What if you could just be with it for 90 seconds? Do you know what would happen? The wave would start to pass on its own, and you would return back to your higher brain. I really want you to let that in. I really... This might be the most important thing I've ever shared with you on this podcast, 90 seconds.

You don't have to hold on forever. You don't have to let the beach ball skim the surface forever. You just have to hold on long enough for the wave to peak and then begin to come down. And for most of us, most of the time, that is survivable, that is doable, even in the hard moments. So how do we actually do this?

Because knowing feelings last 90 seconds is great, but when you're in the middle of one of them while you're parenting, 90 seconds, let's be honest, can feel like a very long time. Well, that's why today I want to give you a simple framework,

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three moves. People remember things best in threes, so I'm gonna give you three moves.

They are notice it, be with it, and tend to it. The first move is to notice it. This is where the feelings wheel comes in because you can't sit with something you can't name. So step one is: what is this? What is happening right now? Name it if you can. If you can't name it, notice where you feel it in your body.

Tight chest, clenched jaw, heavy stomach, heat in the face. Your body knows what the feeling is, even when your brain hasn't caught up yet. Because remember, we define feelings as a vibration in your body caused by a thought. So you can notice the feeling by the vibration in your body, and different feelings show up in different places.

And here's something that's really important. When that feeling comes, please do not label it as good or bad, because it's not good or bad. It just is. The feeling is information. It's not a verdict on you as a person or a parent or your kid, okay? It's not good or bad. It just is. Now, the second part of the framework, the second move is to just be with it.

This is the floating beach ball. You allow it to exist. You don't push it down underwater, and you don't throw it at someone else. You simply acknowledge, ah, there it is. There's the beach ball floating on the water. Okay? I want you to get curious instead of judgmental. I love the phrase, "Isn't that interesting?"

when you feel something activating in you. Instead of reacting or suppressing, try saying to yourself, "Isn't that interesting? I'm feeling something right now." And here's what I know. Just that small shift from a reaction to curiosity creates just an itty-bitty, tiny bit of space, and in that space, everything can change.

Okay? And the third move is to tend to it, and this is where your self-compassion comes in. In the third move, you're gonna talk to yourself the way you would talk to a good friend who's feeling what you're feeling, not with a harsh inner critic, with a kind one. And you wanna watch your self-talk. The narrative we layer on top of a feeling is almost always what makes it bigger and longer-lasting than it needs to be.

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The feeling itself, remember, neuroscience tells us 90 seconds. The story about the feeling, well, that can go on for days. Okay? So the goal is to stay with the feeling, not the story about the feeling. And stay present. You only have to watch the beach ball for 90 seconds. Set a timer if you need to. Let the wave come, peak, and begin to let go.

That's it. That's the whole process. And to illustrate this, I wanna tell you what this actually looked like in my life, because this wasn't a theory for me. This was a practice that I committed to a long time ago, daily, imperfect, sometimes I got it, and sometimes, whoa, I didn't have it at all practice. And when Malcolm was a teenager, and let me tell you, if you know you know, teenagers have a unique gift for activating every feeling on the feelings wheel.

There were moments, so many moments- He'd come home from school or from three hours of basketball practice already in a mood. He'd be short with me, or he'd say something sharp, or he'd push back on something in a way that hit a nerve, and something would activate inside me immediately. Irritation, maybe some hurt underneath that, a flash of the old programming, the five-step system ready to fire.

And if I'm totally honest with you, the desire or the pull to react in the old way was real. The desire to say something snarky back, or correct the tone, or lecture, or to make the feeling stop by addressing his behavior in the moment. You know what I'm talking about? Yeah. But instead, what I started practicing, slowly and imperfectly over the years, was this.

Before I opened my mouth, I would sit with what was happening in me first. Not him, me. I would feel the irritation. I would let it be there. I would feel the vibration in my chest or my throat, and I would remind myself, "This is a wave. It will peak, and then it will pass, and I don't have to act on it right now."

And in that pause, even just 90 seconds of not immediately reacting, something would shift, and I would see him more clearly, not as the kid who was being difficult, but as the kid who was carrying something, a kid who needed me to be regulated in the moment, not another dysregulated person in the room. I can't pinpoint one specific moment to share with you about this, because the truth is, it was hundreds of moments.

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His behavior was my practice ground, and my feelings, my own activation, were the thing that I was working on every single time. That didn't mean I didn't calmly address his behavior after the 90 seconds. It doesn't mean I didn't discuss solutions when we were both ready, that I allowed the, quote, "bad behavior."

I waited until I was sitting with what was happening within me, and I could return to a regulated state. And here's what I want you to understand, and I mean really understand in your bones. Learning to sit with my own feelings is what made it possible for me to sit with his, and him, over time, to learn to sit with his own big feelings.

This is all directly connected. When I was flooded by my own emotional activation, when I was running the five-step system without even knowing it- I couldn't hold his feelings. I was too busy managing mine the only way I knew how, in a dysregulated state. But when I started working on this, when I started letting my feelings float instead of suppressing them or projecting them, I had room.

I had capacity. I could be in the room with his big emotions without needing them to stop so I could feel better, and I could get regulated and back in my higher brain. And here's what happened over time. He watched. He absorbed. Not because I stood up and gave him a lesson about emotional regulation, but because I lived it in front of him in the small, ordinary moments over and over again.

And now, as he rounds the corner to birthday number 22, I can tell you that Malcolm can sit with his own feelings. He has the capacity I had to build from scratch in myself, because it was modeled for him from the time he was young. That's what is possible. That is what we're building when we do this work, for ourselves and for them, and for whoever they raise one day in the future.

This is generational change, and it starts with you deciding to let the beach ball float. I want that for you, I want that for your kids, and I want that for your grandkids. Yeah? Yeah. Okay. Let me share something from inside the Hive. As always, I've changed some details to protect the privacy, but there's a mom, let's call her Renee.

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Renee came to me 'cause she felt like she was always exploding at her kids, and she was so upset about it. "Lisa, I don't wanna keep doing this." Now, Renee had read the books, and she knew what she was supposed to do. She knew. But in the moment, when her kids got emotional and loud and demonstrative with what they were feeling, something in her just went off, and she couldn't understand why.

So she joined the Hive, and we got to work and started our work together, and it became clear pretty quickly that Renee had never, not once in her life, been taught to sit with an uncomfortable feeling. Renee had my old five-step system running on full speed all the time, and every one of her kids' big emotions was landing on her nervous system like a life and death threat.

Can you relate to that? So we started small. We started just naming feelings. I gave her the feelings wheel, and I asked her to educate herself on the feelings. Then I asked her to start noticing them. Just notice the feelings that are coming up for you throughout the day. Put your hand on your chest and say, "I feel this."

And that's it. Don't rush to fix it or explain it or hand it to someone else. Just name it and notice it. Now, the truth is, the first couple weeks on our Hive calls, she told me, "Lisa, I feel like I'm doing nothing. I'm just standing there." And I told her, "That is something. It might be the most important thing you've ever done."

Because over time, something started to shift for Renee. She didn't explode as quickly. She had a little more space between the feeling and the reaction, and her kids started to feel it. Because kids always feel the shift in the emotional temperature of the room. Her oldest daughter said to her one evening, completely unprompted, "Mom, you seem calmer lately, and I like it."

That was it. That was the whole review. Renee told me, with tears in her eyes, it was the best thing her kids had ever said to her. Again, I want that for you, and I want that for your kids. So here's your homework this week, and I'm keeping it simple on purpose. When an uncomfortable feeling shows up this week, and it will, before you do anything else, do this.

Put your hand on your chest, name the feeling if you can, find it in your body, and then just let it be there for 90 seconds, a minute and a half. Set a timer if you need

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to. Seriously, 90 seconds on the clock. In that moment, your job isn't to fix it or understand it. You don't have to share it with anyone or perform it or turn it into a lesson.

You just have to stay with it long enough to let the wave begin to pass. That's it. That's the whole assignment. And if 90 seconds sounds impossible right now, that's actually the most important information you have, because it tells you exactly how long you've been running from your own feelings, and it helps you understand how much room there is to grow.

So in closing, here's what I want you to carry with you from today. Your kids don't need you to be emotion-free. They don't need you to be emotion-safe. A parent who isn't afraid of feelings, their own or their kids', that's what they're looking for. A parent who can be in the room with something hard and not need it to stop immediately or go away, that's what your kids want and need.

That's what builds emotional intelligence in them. And the truth is, you cannot give them that until you build it in yourself. I know this personally, because I had to build it in myself, and I know what it costs to keep doing it the old way and what it produces to do it the new way, and I want that for you, and I want that for your kids.

Every feeling you learn to sit with is a feeling your kid will one day be able to sit with, too. That's the gift, and that's what we're building here. And I know you've got this, and I will 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.