

Ep. #294: What Are You Making It Mean? How Your Thoughts Shape Your Parenting



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 excited to be with you here today and share this topic, and I want to start today with this scenario. Imagine that it's 7:42 in the morning on a school/work day, and you need to leave the house soon, and your kid is standing in the kitchen still in pajamas.

Shoes are not on, backpack is not packed, toast is in hand, and he's staring off into space like there's absolutely nowhere in the world he needs to be. You've already reminded him more than once, and before you even say anything out loud, your brain serves you up a thought about the scenario, about the situation.

Maybe it's, "He's so lazy." Maybe it's, "Why do I have to tell him everything four times?" Maybe it's, "He should be past this by now." Or maybe your brain goes really big really fast, like, "How is this kid ever gonna take care of himself?" Have you been there? Yeah. Me too. Me too. Believe me. Now, here's what I want you to notice.

Something happened, and then your brain served you a thought about what happened, and those, my real-world peaceful parent, are not, capital N, capital O, capital T, they are not the same thing. Let me say that again because this is the entire episode today. Something happens, like your kid isn't ready for school, and your brain serves you a thought about what happened.

Your kid is still in his pajamas. That happened. My kid is lazy. Well, that's a thought. Your kid forgot his backpack. That happened. Your kid is never gonna be responsible. That's a thought. Your teenager rolled her eyes. Yep, she did it. She is so disrespectful. That's a thought Your kid says, "I hate you." Yep, it came out of his mouth.

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"I've completely ruined our relationship." That's a thought. And here's where it gets really interesting. Most of us don't notice the separation. We don't notice that there was the thing that happened, and then there was what our brain made the thing mean. It all gets fused together. My kid rolls his eyes because he doesn't respect me.

My daughter doesn't want to go to the party because she's becoming antisocial. My son forgot another assignment because he doesn't care about school. It feels like one fact. I know. I know it feels like it, but it isn't. There's the circumstance, and then there's the thought your brain serves up about the circumstance, and sometimes the thought is the thing that we as the parents are really reacting to.

Not the circumstance, not your kid, but the thought, and sometimes one thought turns into an entire story. The thought is the sentence your brain serves you. The story is what your brain builds around the thought. Whoa. Did I just, like, blow your mind? I hope so, because this is what we're digging in today, and I heard a sentence somewhere recently, I wish I could tell you where to give the author credit But I don't remember.

What I will tell you is that I've not been able to stop thinking about it, and it was something along the lines of, "Let's not agree with the stories our minds make up and tell us." Let me say it again. "Let's not agree with the stories our minds make up and tell us." I love this so much because notice what it does not say.

It doesn't say, "Stop having thoughts. Stop worrying. Stop thinking negatively. Only think happy thoughts. Make up your mind. Make your mind completely peaceful all the time." I mean, come on. That's not happening, nor is it possible. My brain serves me stories every single day, every single day. The invitation is not to stop your brain from serving them up.

The invitation is to stop automatically believing every one of them, and that's different, my friend. I think a lot of us were never taught this. I certainly wasn't. No one said to me growing up, "Hey, Lisa, because you think a thought, because you think something, doesn't mean it's true." I wish they would have, believe me.

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No one taught me that my brain could offer me a thought, and I could actually look at the thought and say, "Huh, interesting. I'm not sure I wanna believe that." Let me ask you, did anybody teach you this growing up? Probably not. So this is what happens. The thought comes in, "My kid is disrespectful," and instead of us thinking, "Oh, there's a thought," we think, fact.

Stamp it. Notarize it. Put it in the permanent record. My kid is disrespectful, and then we parent from there, right? Are you able to see this? In fact, let's talk about disrespectful because this is such a good example. This word triggers so many parents. I hear it all the time in coaching. Parents say to me, "Lisa, he is so disrespectful.

She is incredibly disrespectful." Or maybe it's, "My kid does not respect me." And I often stop the parent right there and I say, "Okay, what does disrespectful mean? Show me. What actually happened?" And then the parent will say, "Well, my kid rolled his eyes." And I say, "Okay, he rolled his eyes. That happened." Or they'll say, "She talked back."

And I'll say, "Okay, what did she say?" And the parent will say, "She said, 'Leave me alone,' and slammed the door." Okay, that's what happened. Maybe the parent will say, "He swore at me," or, "He yelled at me." Okay, his volume got really loud. Do you see what I'm doing? Because disrespectful is this big hazy nebulous word.

You can't put disrespectful into a wheelbarrow and roll it into my office. You can't show me disrespectful on a video. You can show me an eye roll, a slammed door. You can play me the audio of the swear word or you can tell me the exact sentence your kid said. Those are behaviors. Behaviors we don't like for sure, but they are behaviors.

Disrespectful is the story you are telling yourself about those behaviors, and this matters a lot. Because when we decide our kid is being disrespectful, we're not just dealing with leave me alone, we're dealing with our thoughts, and they might sound something like, "He doesn't respect me. He thinks he can treat me however he wants.

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If I let this go, he'll walk all over me. What kind of adult is he becoming?" Do you see how fast the story grows? And now my emotional reaction to the eye roll or the loud voice gets bigger and bigger and bigger. You see this? Nobody likes to be yelled at. Nobody wants their kid to roll their eyes at them, but we want to deal with what's actually happening, not the story in our mind that's getting bigger and bigger and bigger by the second, okay?

And I also want to be really careful here about assigning motive, because we do this all the time. We say things like, "My kid is trying to get under my skin. She knows exactly what she's doing." He's just doing this to piss me off and make me mad. Really? Do we know that? I mean, come on. Just think about this for a minute.

Do you know for sure that your 11-year-old woke up this morning, stretched in bed, put both feet on the floor, and said to himself, "You know what? Today's the day. I'm gonna be incredibly disrespectful to my mom. I'm gonna wait until about 4:17 when she asks me to turn off the Xbox, and then bam, I'm gonna roll my eyes at her."

I mean, it's funny to even hear me say it like that, right? I mean, come on. Probably not. Our kids are not doing that. What's far more likely is that at 4:17, when you ask your kid to turn off the Xbox, they're disappointed, or they get frustrated, or they get overwhelmed, or they get angry. Their nervous system gets activated into fight, flight, fawn, or freeze, and then the volume gets loud, and their skills of managing their emotions, being able to manage the emotions they're having, go offline.

They don't know how to say yet, "Mom, I'm really frustrated right now that you're asking me to get off the Xbox because I'm in the middle of something, and I wasn't prepared for the transition." They don't know how to say that yet. They're learning. They're building the skill. I mean, it would be nice if at 11, 12, 14, 16 they could say that, right?

Instead, we get, "Oh, my goodness. Leave me alone. Five more minutes." Now, do I want us to teach our kids over time how to express frustration differently? Absolutely. Otherwise, it would be permissive parenting. Can I hold a limit around

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swearing at me? Absolutely. You can say to your kid, "You can be mad. You can't call me that."

Of course. If we need to, we put limits and consequences around it. Absolutely. That is what peaceful parenting is all about. Strong spine and soft heart. But you don't have to add in your brain the thought that your kid is a disrespectful human being who's purposely trying to make your life miserable.

That's the story. And what I want to tell you today is that the story changes how we show up as parents. Let me explain the science to you simply because there is actually science behind this. Here's what's happening. Our brains are constantly trying to make sense of things, especially when there's an unknown.

Our brains do not love certainty at all. It wants to know, what does this mean? Why is this happening? What's going to happen next? And when there is uncertainty, your brain often reads uncertainty as a threat. Okay? This is leftover from caveman days, where uncertainty often meant you were gonna die. So your brain often reads uncertainty as a threat, and it gets your amygdala involved.

And the alarm system starts going off whenever the amygdala gets involved. Something feels dangerous, not necessarily physically dangerous, but maybe dangerous to the relationship, or dangerous to your kid's future, or dangerous to your idea of yourself as a good parent. And once the alarm gets activated, your body responds quickly, without you even realizing it most times.

Your heart rate might go up. Your muscles might tighten. Your voice changes. You feel urgency. You get triggered. And here's the crazy part. The threat your nervous system is responding to may not actually be what your kid is doing. It may be the thought your brain just served you about what your kid is doing.

Let me give you some examples. Let's say your nine-year-old forgets her homework. Your brain might say, "She's never gonna be responsible." Now your body is reacting to the imagined future of a 25-year-old who can't hold down a job, but your kid is nine, and she forgot a worksheet. When the alarm system is going off, it doesn't feel like a worksheet.

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It feels like, "I have to fix this right now, or I'm failing him." The urgency is where we get into trouble because once there's urgency, we come in hot. We lecture. We threaten. We over-correct. We pile on consequences. We attack character, and meanwhile, our kid is standing there thinking, "Wow, I forgot my math paper."

Do you see the mismatch? So how to fix this? Well, let me help you. This is one of my favorite questions. I've used it for years. I use it tens of times a day when my brain is firing. I ask myself, "What am I making this mean?" Try it. Your daughter gets in the car after soccer and gives you the dreaded teenage grunt.

You ask, "How was practice?" "Fine." And she starts scrolling on her phone. Okay, what happened? Your daughter got in the car and said, "Fine," and then looked at her phone. What are you making it mean? Maybe you're making it mean she's rude, or she doesn't appreciate you, or she doesn't want to talk to you anymore, or something's really, really wrong with soccer or the coach or a teammate.

I do everything for this kid, and this is what I get. Whoa. Right? What if she had a terrible practice? What if she got embarrassed? What if she missed a shot? What if someone said something snarky to her? What if she's tired? What if she's hungry? What if the phone grunt has nothing to do with you? But we don't know yet.

And here's the thing, our brain hates not knowing the answer. It finds it almost intolerable to not understand why she's grunting, saying, "Fine," and scrolling her phone. So what does it do? Our brain fills in the blank, and usually it fills in the blank with whatever story it already knows well. She's being disrespectful.

She's being difficult. Something's really wrong. Let me tell you, I come by this work honestly. I spent a lot of years doing this with Malcolm, making his behavior mean something. One of the biggest stories I carried around, which I'm a little embarrassed to tell you this, but one of the biggest stories I carried around was that Malcolm is lazy.

Ugh, it's hard for me to even say it out loud on this podcast, but I believed it. Like, I really believed it. And because I believed it, I judged him through that lens, right? Do you know how this works? Your brain serves you a thought, Malcolm is lazy, and then it serves it to you again and again and again.

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And after you've thought it enough times, you start to believe it. And once you believe my kid is lazy, your brain gets really good at finding evidence that you're right. He didn't do something when I thought he should. See? Lazy. I had to remind him. Lazy. He wasn't motivated by something I thought should motivate him.

Lazy. He wanted to rest when I thought he should be productive. There it is again. Lazy. And it created this entire story in my mind about how Malcolm was. And I wanna be really clear, the story was not productive for him, it was not productive for me, and it was absolutely not productive for our relationship.

Because I wasn't just responding to whatever was happening in the moment, I was responding to my story that Malcolm was lazy. And the label came in the room with me whenever he did something that I didn't like. And when you're looking at somebody through a label, you stop being curious and you move into judgment.

You think you already know them. Why didn't he do it? Lazy. Why does he need a reminder? Lazy. Why isn't he doing it my way? Lazy. Case closed. And when I really began to understand thought work and apply it, one of the biggest gifts was realizing, wait a minute, Malcolm isn't lazy. Is it... It isn't a fact. It's a thought that I've thought so many times that I started believing it was a fact.

So then I started questioning it. I started asking, "What am I making this mean?" I started understanding the difference between the situation or the circumstance and my thoughts about it. And once I stopped treating the story as gospel, I could actually see Malcolm, not my interpretation of him, not the story, but him.

I got curious. What motivates him? What doesn't? How does h- his brain work? What does he need support with? Where is he incredibly self-motivated? Where am I expecting him to operate like me, a full adult, instead of himself? And that changed everything. Listen, I didn't have to replace Malcolm is lazy with some ridiculous thought like, Malcolm is the most motivated human being who's ever walked the planet.

That's not thought work I just had to stop automatically believing the first story my brain handed me. And I really want you to hear this part, because I don't want you to listen to this thinking, "Well, Lisa has this figured out. Her brain doesn't do this

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anymore." Ha. No. No, no, no. Just like you, my brain is a story-making machine, too.

I spend about three minutes every morning writing my thoughts down, my stories, the things my brain wants to get me to believe, the gaps that it wants to fill in with negative information. Three minutes. Why? Because I wanna know what my brain is serving up to me. I'm constantly scanning. What story am I telling myself?

What did I just make that mean? Is it true? Do I have facts? Do I wanna believe that? Is this thought helping me? I do this all the time. All the time. This is not work you graduate from. Your brain doesn't suddenly get a certificate and s- that says, "Congratulations, we will never jump to conclusions again," or, "We will only serve up happy thoughts."

No. No, no, no. That's not what happens. The skill is becoming really good at catching it. What am I making this mean? Do I wanna believe this? Oh, there's a story. Interesting. What do I wanna do with that? You see? And the stories that really get parents, I mean, really get us, are the ones about the future, because those stories make us feel like we're being a responsible parent.

They might sound like, "Well, I'm just being a good parent. If I don't worry about this, who will? I have to think ahead." And yeah, I mean, we do need to think ahead. We're parents. But there is a difference between preparation and fear spinning in circles, and here's one of my favorite ways to tell the difference.

Real preparation gives you something to do. Fear just gives you dread. If your kid f- keeps forgetting his lunch and you think, "I'm going to put a sticky note on the door," or, "I'm going to have him set an alarm," great, that's preparation. If your kid is struggling in math and you think, "I'm going to email the teacher and find out what support is available," great, that's preparation.

If your daughter's struggling socially and you think, "I'm going to create some space tonight and ask a few open-ended questions from my higher regulated brain," great, that's preparation. There's a next step But if you think, "What if she never has any friends?" What do you do with that? Nothing. You just suffer.

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What if he can't support himself? What's the action item there? There isn't one. What if she quits soccer and becomes someone who quits everything? Again, there's nothing useful you can do with that. That's not preparation. That's your mind running into the future and bringing dread back. And I want you to remember this.

Sometimes we think we're parenting the kid in front of us, but we're actually parenting some 25-year-old our brain just invented, and then we hand the bill to the nine-year-old, and that's a lot for a nine-year-old to carry. Yeah? Yeah. Okay, let me give you something really simple. So simple that you might roll your eyes at me.

Go ahead. You're allowed, and I promise not to think it's disrespectful. Here it is. You ready? When you catch the story, put four words in front of it, "I'm having the thought that," right in front of it. That's it. Here's what this would sound like. I'm having the thought that my kid is lazy. I'm having the thought that she doesn't respect me.

I'm having the thought that this is never going to get better. I'm having the thought that I'm failing. I'm having the thought that he's doing this on purpose. Now, does that magically make the thought disappear? No. Does it prove the thought is false? No, that's not the point. What it does is create a teeny, tiny bit of space.

If you switch from he's lazy to I'm having the thought that he's lazy, there's just a little bit of space in there. Can you feel the difference? Just a little, a half inch, and that's all you need. Because in that half inch, you can ask what actually happened. Oh, he didn't start the chore when I asked.

That's what's happened. Now I have something to work with. Instead of my kid is disrespectful, I'm having the thought my kid is disrespectful because he didn't start the chore when I asked. Okay. Right? She yelled, "Leave me alone," and slammed the door. Great. Now I can decide what I want to do with that behavior.

Maybe I let everybody regulate, and I talk to her later. Maybe I address the slammed door. Maybe I teach a better way to ask for space. Maybe I say, "You can

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ask for space without shouting at me." But I'm parenting the actual thing, the slammed door, or the not starting the chore when I asked, not the giant story.

Now, I can already hear you. Maybe you're saying, "Okay, Lisa, but sometimes I am right." Yeah, absolutely. Sometimes your concern is legitimate. Sometimes something is really going on. Sometimes your kid needs more support. Sometimes your teen really is pulling away. Sometimes school really is becoming a problem.

Sometimes something in your family r- really does need to change, like we need to set a limit. I'm not asking you to gaslight yourself, and I'm not asking you to put your head in the sand. I'm asking you to look at the thought before you obey it, before you make it gospel and true. That's all. Because even if the thought turns out to be accurate By putting that space in, you still get to choose how to respond to it.

You can be right about the problem and still be able to handle it in a way that makes everything worse. Yeah? So that half inch matters. Giving it just some space matters. All right. You know I love giving you homework, and I'm gonna make this week's really simple. This week, I want you to catch one story.

Just one. Not all of them. You'll drive yourself crazy trying to catch all of them. So just catch one. Catch yourself being really triggered. Maybe your kid rolls their eyes, or they forget something, or they say no, or they don't text back, or they get a grade you weren't expecting, or they melt down over something that seems completely ridiculous to you, right?

Okay, when that happens, I want you to ask yourself, "What happened?" And then I want you to ask, "What am I making this mean?" Write down the exact thought. Don't sanitize it. If your brain says, "This kid is never gonna have his shiz together," write that down. That is the useful thought to see. So don't s- say, "The kid is never gonna have his shiz together," and then write down, "I'm having concerns about his executive function."

Come on. Write down exactly what your brain said, and then add in the front of it, "I'm having the thought that my kid is never going to have his shiz together." And notice it. Sit with it. Look at it. And then ask yourself, "Do I want to believe this?"

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Is there another explanation? What do I actually know? What behavior is really in front of me?

And most importantly, what does this moment need from me?" Not 10 years from now, not college, not their marriage, not their career, not who they'll be at 30, but this moment. What does this moment need from me? And then take action from there. All right, let's bring it home. Your brain tells stories. Mine does, too.

That isn't the problem. Your kid does something, and your brain immediately starts making meaning out of it, fills in the gaps. What does this say about my kid? What does this say about me? What does this say about our relationship? Where is this headed? And when uncertainty gets interpreted as threats, sometimes the alarm system gets activated.

The thought doesn't just sound true, it feels true, and that's when a forgotten backpack suddenly feels like a 9/11 emergency. So remember, there's what happened, and there's what you make it mean. Your kid rolled their eyes. That happened. My kid is disrespectful. That's a thought. My kid needed another reminder.

That happened. My kid is lazy. That's a thought. My kid said fine and stared at their phone. That happened. We're losing connection. That's a thought. Catch it. Get curious about it. Ask, "What am I making this mean?" And then give yourself four little words. I'm having the thought that. Half an inch, that's all Half an inch between the story and the reaction.

Half an inch where curiosity can wiggle its way in. Half an inch where you can come back to the kid who's actually standing in front of you. Not the kid from yesterday, not the adult your brain is predicting, not the label, not the story, but your kid, right here, right now. You don't have to believe everything you think.

Yeah? Yeah. 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