

Ep. #295: Stop Labeling, Start Investigating: How to Really See Your Kid



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 to today's episode. I am absolutely thrilled to be with you today, and I wanna start today's episode with something I hear from parents all the time, and if I'm honest, something I have absolutely done myself. We think we know our kids, right? I mean, come on. On one hand, of course we do. We've been studying these humans for years.

We know which kid is gonna forget the water bottle, we know which one is gonna lose it when we say no, we know which one needs 17 reminders to get out the door. We know which one is gonna talk to every human being in the grocery store, and which one is not, which one is dramatic, which one is responsible, which one procrastinates, which one worries, which one gives up when things get hard.

We know our kids, right? But today, I wanna challenge us a little bit, because I know there is a difference between knowing your kid and deciding who your kid is. Okay, let me say that again. There is a difference between knowing your kid and deciding who your kid is, and once we decide who our kid is, something really interesting can happen, and it's that we stop looking for new information.

We stop investing. We stop wondering. We stop asking questions, because we think we already know the answer. Why didn't he start the chore? Because he's lazy. Why is she having such a big reaction? Because she's dramatic. Why did he lose his homework again? He's irresponsible. Why won't she go to the birthday party?

She's being difficult. Case closed. And today, I wanna talk about what happens when we close the case on our kids, because here's the truth. Your kid is not a closed case. Your kid is developing right in front of you, and if we aren't mindful, we can get so attached to what we think we know about our kids that we stop seeing the kid who's actually standing in front of us.

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Yeah? Okay. So let's dig into this. I want you to notice the pattern, the process, and how easily this happens. Let's say your kid needs three reminders to take out the garbage. That happened, and after it happens enough times, we have the thought, "He's lazy." Your daughter has a huge emotional reaction when plans change, and maybe honestly, this happens very often, and eventually, you have the thought, "She's dramatic."

Your kid loses another homework assignment, another, and you have the thought, "He's irresponsible." Your kid argues with you about everything, and you have the thought that he's difficult. And I wanna be really, really clear here, because I don't want you to misunderstand what I'm saying. Sometimes there is a real pattern.

Your kid may actually struggle with getting started. Your kid may actually lose things frequently. Your kid may have intense emotions. Your kid may struggle with executive functioning. Your kid may have ADHD. We're not pretending those things aren't happening, and I'm not asking you to ignore information or patterns.

I'm asking you to notice the difference between describing something your kid is struggling with and deciding that the struggle is who your kid is, because, real world peaceful parent, those are not the same thing. "My kid is having a hard time getting started on things he's interested in," that gives you information.

"My kid is lazy," that gives your kid an identity. "My daughter has some really intense emotions and has a hard time regulating when she's disappointed," information. "She's dramatic," identity. "My kid is still learning how to manage money," information. He's bad with money, identity. Do you see where I'm going with this?

A pattern can be real without becoming an identity, and I think this matters so much because once we turn the pattern into identity, it starts to sound permanent. That's just who he is. That's just how she is. I know this kid, case closed. There is actually a name for something our brains do once we believe something is true.

It's called confirmation bias. Now, you don't need to remember the term, because there's not gonna be a quiz, but what I do want you to understand is how it works, because, oh my gosh, our brains are experts at confirmation bias, and it works like

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this. Once we believe something, our brains get really good at noticing the evidence that confirms what we believe, and we're rarely interested in the evidence that contradicts what we believe.

So let me say that again. I feel like that's really important for you to hear that a second time. Once we believe something, our brains get really good at noticing the evidence that confirms what we already believe, and our brains are not very interested in the evidence that contradicts it. We sort information through what we already believe.

I did this with Malcolm. For years, I had the thought that Malcolm was lazy. Ugh, it's embarrassing to even say it out loud. I thought it over and over again, and eventually I believed it. I wasn't walking around thinking, "I'm currently holding a subjective hypothesis about my son's level of motivation."

Nope, I wasn't doing that. What I was thinking is, "Malcolm is lazy." And once I believed that, guess what my brain did? It started collecting evidence. He procrastinated. See? There it is. He needed reminding. Again, more evidence. He wasn't motivated to do something I thought he should be motivated to do, and I used that as evidence to label him as lazy.

He didn't get started the exact moment I thought he should, so of course, lazy. He wanted to do something on his timeline instead of mine. Rubber stamp, lazy. My brain spent a lot of time building a really impressive case, except there was a small problem with the case that I was building. Malcolm was a high-level basketball player his entire childhood.

Do you know how much work that takes? Hours and hours and hours of practice, training, games, travel, commitment, dedication, showing up when you're tired, showing up when you don't feel like it, working on something over and over again because you wanna get better. This supposedly lazy kid was putting an enormous amount of work into basketball.

He was also doing his schoolwork, and then he got his first job working in a restaurant as a busboy. He worked. Hard. So wait a minute, how could I have all

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that information and still be convinced Malcolm was lazy? Well, the answer is, because my brain already believed it knew the answer, and that's confirmation bias.

The information that fit my belief got filed under proof Malcolm is lazy, and the information that didn't fit, well, that just got blotted out and ignored. My brain said things like, basketball was different. He liked basketball. He was interested, so that doesn't count. Whoa, wait a minute. What if it does count?

What if instead of proving Malcolm wasn't lazy, it was getting, giving me new information about how Malcolm worked? What if Malcolm, like most of us, was highly motivated by things that interested him? What if he was motivated when he could see the goal? What if there were some tasks he had a hard time initiating?

What if there were places where he needed support? What if there were things that mattered a lot to me that simply didn't matter as much to him, like putting the dishes away or taking out the trash? And here was a big one for me. What if I was expecting Malcolm to operate like me instead of like Malcolm?

Well, now we have something to investigate. Now the case is open again, and this is the part I really want you to hear. Because the real problem with believing Malcolm is lazy wasn't only that I might have been missing information about Malcolm, that belief changed me. When I thought Malcolm was lazy, I was quick to yell, quick to get on him, quick to get frustrated, quick to get dysregulated.

Think about that. Malcolm hadn't done a chore yet, and that was happening right now. Because I wasn't only responding to the chore, I was responding to the whole file. Every time I had to remind him, every time he procrastinated, every time he hadn't done something on my timeline, every time he wasn't motivated by something I thought should motivate him, all of those thoughts came into the room with me.

So maybe the moment in front of me deserved a three out of 10 response, but I was at an eight. Because I wasn't just responding to the chore isn't done, I was responding to, "Oh, here we go again. He's so lazy. Why do I have to stay on top of him? Why can't he just do what I need him to do? Why does he always do this?"

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Can you see the difference? And the truth is, if we come into a conversation at an eight, what do you think our kid is going to do? He's probably not gonna say, "Hey, Mom. Thanks for this helpful feedback. I appreciate the opportunity to improve my task initiation skills." No, come on. Now, his nervous system is probably at an eight too, because I brought an eight into the room about putting the dishes away. So maybe he gets defensive, he pushes back, he shuts down, he argues, he ignores, and then what do I do?

I collect that as more evidence. See? See what I mean? This kid is impossible to motivate. Do you see the loop? Can you see it? I wanna be careful here. I'm not saying that we parents create every behavior we're concerned about, and I'm not saying if your kid struggles with something, you caused it by thinking the wrong thoughts.

Not at all. What I am saying is, what we believe about our kids affects how we approach our kids, and how we approach our kid affects what happens between us next, and that matters a lot. Let me lay this out for you. The truth is, when I stopped thinking the thought Malcolm is lazy, and I stopped treating him like Malcolm is lazy is a fact, I didn't suddenly decide, "Oh my gosh, Malcolm is the hardest-working person who's ever walked the face of the earth."

Nope, I didn't do that. Because I didn't need another label, and I didn't need to go from one extreme to the other, like Jack Handy in Saturday Night Live with his ridiculous affirmations. I didn't need another label. What I needed was curiosity, and when I got curious, it was a game-changer. When I got curious, I could regulate myself.

I could connect with him. I could talk to him. I could understand his perspective. I could coach him. We could have productive conversations about chores and tasks. We could talk about planning. We could talk about how to execute something to the expectation. We could talk about what support he needed and what he was responsible for, and we could do all of that while regulated, and that changed everything.

Because when I was regulated, Malcolm could respond. When I wasn't coming at him from the thought and the attitude of, "You're lazy, and here we go again,"

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there was room for an actual conversation. There was room for him to tell me what was going on. There was room for me to breathe and listen. There was room for us to problem solve and for him to learn.

And isn't that exactly what we want? We don't wanna win the case. We wanna help our kids develop Yeah? Yeah. Here's another example. For a long time, I had this idea that Malcolm was bad with money. Now, think about that sentence, Malcolm is bad with money. I mean, what exactly does that mean? Being good with money, understanding money, and having a strategy is a skill.

Actually, it's a whole bunch of skills. Planning, saving, delaying gratification, understanding what things cost, making choices, making mistakes, learning from those mistakes, thinking ahead, prioritizing. These are all skills, and most of our kids learn them over a lifetime. And the truth is, Malcolm was no different.

As he was growing up, he was learning the different skills. He's still continuing to learn the different skills. Now, can you feel how different that is from he's bad with money? He's bad with money is a closed case. It's an identity that leaves little room for growth or looking through a different lens.

And leaving room for growth does not mean lowering the expectations. It doesn't mean, "Oh, well, he's learning. I guess I'll pay his credit card forever." No. Come on. What it does mean is that if I can drop the identity and understand what's really happening here, that being, quote, "good with money" is a skill, it means I can teach, I can coach, I can let him practice, I can let him experience consequences.

We can have conversations, and I can set expectations that he's gonna develop the skills. Curiosity helps me figure out what he needs to learn. That's a massive difference than giving him a label. And there's another reason I think this matters so much. Our outer voice becomes our kids' inner voice. Think about yourself for a minute.

What were you called growing up? What did people decide about you? What was the label put on you over and over and over again? Were you the shy one? Were you labeled the difficult one? Were you labeled the smart one, or the troublemaker,

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or the sensitive one, or the irresponsible one, or the chubby one, or the loud one, or the bossy one?

Were you the kid who was bad at math? Were you the kid who was bad with money? I had plenty of labels put upon me as a child and a young adult. I was labeled loud. That may not be a surprise to you based on the sound of my voice, but I was labeled loud, bossy, a big girl, bad with money. And the truth is, some of those labels can follow us for a really long time.

You hear something enough, and eventually you may stop hearing someone thinks this about me and start hearing this is who I am. I'm just someone who's bad with money. I'm just a loud human being. I'm just bossy and no one likes that. I'm not good at this. I can't do that. And now it's not somebody else's voice anymore.

It's mine. And that is why I really want us to be thoughtful about the identities we hand our kids. Not scared as parents, not walking on eggshells. You're going to say things you wish you hadn't said. We all have. I know I have. You're going to make assumptions. I do from time to time. You're going to get frustrated when your kids don't jump up and do something, or they make a mistake.

You're human. It's not about being perfect. It's about being awake. Because I don't want my frustration in a moment to become Malcolm's definition of himself, and I especially don't want something he hasn't learned yet to become something he believes he can never learn. That's very different. I'm bad with money versus I'm learning how to manage money.

I can't focus versus focusing on things that don't interest me are harder for my brain, and I'm learning how to do it. I'm irresponsible versus I'm developing systems that help me remember what I'm responsible for. Do you hear the difference? This isn't positive thinking. It's not affirmations that are BS.

It's not pretending everything is wonderful. It's accurate thinking that leaves room for growth. And I wanna mention something briefly, because labels aren't the only words that sound negative. Sometimes we close the case on our kids with really lovely sounding labels. She's the responsible one. He's an athlete.

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She's the smart one. He's our social kid. She's so mature. Those might feel wonderful until the responsible kid needs help, until the athlete wants to quit or try something else, until the smart kid hits a ceiling and struggles in class, until the social kid feels lonely, until the mature kid falls apart and desperately needs someone else to take care of things for a moment.

Then, sometimes we don't know what to do with the new information because it doesn't match the kid we decided they were, and sometimes the kid doesn't know what to do with the new information because we've labeled them in a certain way. So this isn't really all about negative labels, it's about certainty.

It's about leaving enough space for your kid to evolve and keep showing you who they are. Yeah? Yeah. Okay, so what do we do with all this? You know, I wanna give you something practical in this episode. I wanna bring you back to something I've taught for years. Be the detective. Get curious. Here's the problem.

A detective can't investigate a case they've already decided is solved, right? So I want you to reopen the case, and I have three questions for you. Question number one, what have I decided is true about my kid? Really answer this. Don't give yourself or me, if you wanna send me an email, the nice answer.

But what does your brain actually say, maybe without realizing it? He's lazy. She's dramatic. He's irresponsible. She's selfish. He's difficult. He's manipulative. He's entitled. Whatever it is, write it down. Okay? And then question number two, what evidence am I missing because it doesn't fit the label I already have?

This is a good one. If your kid is lazy, where does he really work hard? If she's irresponsible, where does she take responsibility without being asked? If he's selfish, when have you seen generosity? If he's difficult, who does he cooperate with, and when, and under what circumstances? Again, we're not doing this to prove ourselves wrong.

We're collecting all the data. That's what a good detective does. All the data. And then question number three, what am I missing or not seeing because of confirmation bias, because I've already decided who my kid is? Sit with that one.

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What am I not seeing because I've already decided who my kid is? Maybe you're missing a skill that needs to be taught.

Maybe you're not seeing overwhelm. Maybe you're not seeing the goal that matters to you but doesn't matter to them. Maybe you're missing where they are actually working incredibly hard. Maybe you're not seeing that your expectations don't fit this particular kid. Maybe you're not seeing that something that was true two years ago isn't true anymore.

Here's what I know. You won't know until you reopen the case. So here's your homework this week. Pick one, one kid, one label, one thing you think you know. Okay? Finish this sentence, "My kid is..." And again, don't clean it up for me. Write what you actually think. Then for one week, become a detective. Collect the data.

Where does this belief seem accurate, and where doesn't it? Where does your kid defy the b- belief or behave differently? What motivates them? What skills might they m- be missing? What circumstances make the struggle harder? And here's the piece I really want you to pay attention to, who do I become when I believe this about my kid?

Who do I become? Do I yell? Do I lecture? Do I hover? Do I rescue? Do I micromanage? Do I get impatient? Do I walk into the conversation already irritated? Do I assume motive? Do I stop asking questions? Because remember, the label doesn't only affect how you see your kid, it affects how you show up to parent them.

That is something you have enormous influence over. So in closing, I want you to remember that our outer voice often becomes their inner voice. What you say matters. How you talk to them matters. How you think about them affects how you show up with them, and how they show up for themselves, and what they learn to believe about themselves.

I wanna encourage you to stay curious enough to see the kid who is standing in front of you today, not just the kid you've already decided they are. Until next time, I'm wishing you peaceful parenting.

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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.