

Ep. #297: Why Your Kid Falls Apart After School



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With Your Host
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Welcome, welcome, welcome. Welcome to today's episode. I am so happy to be with you here today, and I want to start today's episode by asking you to picture something with me. It's 3:15 and you're in the pickup line, or you're standing at the bus stop, or you're sitting in the car outside of practice, and you are genuinely happy to see your kid.

Maybe you missed them and you've been thinking about them, or maybe you've even planned something a little special today after school or tonight. And the door opens to the car, and they throw their backpack in, jump in, and slam the door. You say four words, "Hey, how was your day?" And the entire car explodes.

Maybe there's screaming or slamming or, "Leave me alone," or, "Why do you always ask me that?" Or a full body meltdown over a water bottle or the radio station or the fact that you looked at them, and you're sitting there in the driver's seat thinking, "The teacher told me they had a great day." Yeah. Yeah, I know.

I've been there, and my goal today is to help you understand what is actually going on in that car, because I promise you, it's probably not what you think it is. And when you understand what's really happening, you stop taking it personally, and when you stop taking it personally, everything changes. So let's dig in.

Here's how I want you to think about it. Every morning, your kid wakes up and straps on an invisible emotional backpack. You do it too, by the way. I do it. All humans do this. And all day long, the backpack fills up, not with books or homework, but unprocessed emotions. Every feeling your kid has all day that they do not get to process or express goes into that invisible emotional backpack.

Every frustration they swallow, in the backpack. Every time they wanted to say something and had to stay quiet, in the backpack. Every disappointment, every worry, every scratchy tag on their shirt, every moment of, "I don't get this and everyone else does," every glance across the lunchroom wondering if they still have a friend.

Yep, all of that, every single one of those, goes in the invisible emotional backpack. And then by 3:00, that backpack is bulging. I mean bulging. Now, let's talk about what's actually in that backpack, because I think if most of us could unzip it and look inside, most of us would burst into tears. Here's the soundtrack running in most of our kids' heads all day long.

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"My clothes are itchy. This chair hurts. I'm starving. I'm freezing. I'm hot. I have to go to the bathroom, but I don't wanna ask. I don't understand this and everybody else does. I raised my hand and she didn't call on me. I got called on and I didn't know the answer. She was my friend yesterday, and today she's sitting with someone else.

There's a birthday party this weekend, I think, and I'm pretty sure I'm not invited. Everyone was talking about something and I don't know what it is. I don't like how I look. I have so much to say, and there's nowhere to say it. I did badly on that test or exam and homework, and I don't want anybody to know.

I'm bored out of my mind. I'm fidgety. I'm uncomfortable. I'm so far behind. I don't fit in here." All day long, all day long, and not a single one of those gets processed, not one, because there's no time, and it's not a safe place. There's a bell ringing, and it's time to go to social studies, so in the backpack it goes.

Or it's lunchtime, and we have to hurry up and eat, so all the morning's feelings stay right in that backpack. Now, here's the part I really want you to sit with. Carrying that filled, stuffed, bulging backpack around all day is not free. It's not. It costs your kids something. Think about what we ask our kids all day at school at any age.

Sit down, stand up, line up, wait, don't talk, talk now, focus, stop fidgeting, raise your hand, put it away, put your hand down, get it out, transition, transition again, be quiet, be still, be patient, manage that disappointment silently because we're moving on to math. Every single one of those is a job for the thinking brain, the front part of the brain, the part that manages impulses and holds feelings and makes good decisions.

And here's the thing about the thinking brain in a developing child. It's not fully developed yet. It's not built. It gets tired. It runs out. So by the end of the day, your kid is not walking to your car with an empty backpack or with a full tank of gas. They're walking to your car on fumes, and then they see you, and the whole thing comes crashing down, or the backpack gets unzipped and all the emotions come flying out.

Now, I wanna talk to my parents of teenagers for a minute because this does not stop when the tantrums on the kitchen floor stop. And here's what I want you to

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know first. This does not stop at age nine, it doesn't stop at 12, and it doesn't stop at 16. I know because I live it. My son is grown now, but I can tell you that the after-school meltdown was alive and well in my house even when he went away to college.

It just looks different. It wasn't a tantrum on the kitchen floor. It was a grunt. It was a door closing. It was, or is still, "I don't wanna talk about it." It was the snap over something that made absolutely no sense. Same backpack, bigger kid. And when that bigger kid walks in carrying a full backpack, don't mistake the grunt or the door slam for disrespect.

They may simply be a kid who's been holding something heavy all day, maybe all week, maybe all month, and doesn't have the words for it yet. So I ask you to give them the exact same thing you'd give a six-year-old: food, space, quiet, minimal, if not no, questions, and then be nearby. Because here's what I know about teenagers.

They talk sideways. They talk in the car. They talk in the dark. They talk while you're doing dishes, and they're pretending to be looking at something else. They almost never talk when we're looking right at them and asking them to. Which brings me to the part that changes everything. Are you ready for this one?

The after-school meltdown is a compliment to you. I know. I know. Stay with me. Your kid held it together all day at school, all day, for a teacher they see six hours a day and a room full of people who are watching them, and then they get to you, and they fall apart. Why is this? Well, it's because you, you are the safe place.

Let me say that again because I want it to land in your body, not just your head. You are the safe place. You are the person your kid trusts enough to be a complete mess in front of. They do not unpack their backpack for their teacher. They do not unpack it for the carpool mom. They do not unpack it for their coach or their friends at the lunch table.

They unpack it for you because somewhere deep down underneath all of it, they know you are the person that is not going to leave. You are the person that is not going to stop loving them. This is where I can pull it all out of the backpack and process it. Now, I realize, believe me, I realize that it does not feel like a compliment when you're getting yelled at in the Target parking lot.

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No, it does not, and I'm not gonna pretend it does. Sometimes it feels like we're the punching bag, and our brains go right to those thoughts, don't they? They go right to, "He's being disrespectful. She's being a brat. Why does he only do this to me? She saves the worst for me, and I'm the one doing everything."

Yeah, I hear you. I have thought every single one of those things from time to time. But here's the truth underneath the behavior. They are not giving you a hard time, they are having a hard time, and you are the one safe enough to have it in front of, I promise you. A mom I've been working with in the hive, I'll call her Dana, and I've changed some details so to protect her privacy, brought this to a call three weeks into the school year, and Dana was scared.

Her nine-year-old was melting down in the car every single day, screaming, crying, and one day he threw a shoe. He had never done this before, not once. She had already emailed the teacher twice. She was starting to wonder if something was happening at school that he wasn't telling her about, or if something was really wrong with him.

She was laying in bed at night worrying about this. But Inside the Hive, I gave her the tool of getting curious, not furious, and we looked at the actual day, and here's what she saw. New school year, new teacher, longer day than last year, recess cut back, and a lunch period so short he was coming home with half of his lunch uneaten.

She realized nothing was wrong with him. His day had just gotten harder to hold. So I encouraged Dana to change one thing, not five, just one, and it was no questions in the car. None. Not, "How was your day?" Not, "Did you turn the thing in?" Not, "Did you like your lunch?" or, "What did you have for lunch?" Instead, she would put food in his hand right away, she'd play soothing music, and drive home with a smile on her face.

Now, she came back to a Hive call to report that the first two days were so uncomfortable she felt like she was crawling out of her skin and she almost quit. She said she sat there biting her lip and gripping the steering wheel because she wanted to fix it so badly, but by day four, he started talking on his own about halfway home unprompted by her, and by week five, she told me the car ride had become the best 15 minutes of their day.

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She didn't change her kid. She changed the landing. So what do we actually do here? Well, here are the four steps, and you know I always want to give you something you can use today, so here we go. Number one, don't take it personally. This is the whole ballgame. This is step one for a reason, because taking it personally is the gateway.

If you take it personally, you're going to get triggered, and if you get triggered, you get dysregulated, and if you get dysregulated, you're not in your higher brain where you're calm and logical and can access the tools. Instead, you're dysregulated, and you storm right alongside your kid. Now there are two people in the car with an empty tank, and nobody is regulating at that point.

I always say when a storming parent meets a storming child, there's gonna be an explosion 100% of the time. And a big part of not taking it personally is dropping the picture in your head before the car door even opens. And let me tell you, this one was hard for me. I used to sit in the car expecting Malcolm to come out of that building smiling, running to the car, and telling about me about his day in the most lovely indoor voice, almost as if we were watching a Hallmark movie.

And when that didn't happen, I was disappointed, and my disappointment came out sideways as irritation and dysregulation. So drop the picture. Expect the bulging backpack, and then you can be pleasantly surprised when it doesn't show up. But expect it. Number two, show up regulated, and I mean actually regulated.

60 seconds in the pickup line, that's all I'm asking for. Put your phone down. Take three deep breaths to reach the bottom of your lungs, drop your shoulders, and unclench your jaw, and give a big, giant fire-breathing exhale. Because here's the real deal. Your calm is the only thing entering that car that they can borrow.

They can't regulate themselves. Their thinking brain is offline, and yours can be available to them, so regulate. Number three, be the detective, not the interrogator. This is not one size fits all, and I wanna be really clear about that. Some kids need total silence for 15 minutes. Some kids need to ramble and get it all out and have you say nothing.

Some kids need food before they need words. A lot of kids need food right after school. Some kids need to move, get outside, shoot a basket, walk the dog, before a

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single conversation can happen. And some kids need you shoulder to shoulder instead of face to face. That's why the car works so well. Your job isn't to guess.

Your job is to watch. Try one thing. If it works, keep doing it. If it doesn't, move on to the next thing. But pay attention to what actually helps. And I'll be honest with you, I got this wrong for a long time. When Malcolm was little, I was a peppering machine. How was your day? Who did you play with? What did you eat?

Did you have fun? What did you learn? What do you want to do after school? Was so-and-so nice to you today? Question, question, question, question. And every single one of those questions was stuffing the backpack more instead of less. I was asking his exhausted thinking brain to do more work at the exact moment it had nothing left and needed to rest.

He didn't need my questions. He needed my quiet. It took me an embarrassing long time to figure that out, and when I finally did, the drive home changed almost overnight. And if I'm totally honest with you, I thought the sign of a good parent at the time was someone who asked all the questions and got all the answers.

And what I learned was that in our situation, being a good parent meant driving home calm, regulated, and silent. That's what my kid needed at that time. So step three is to be the detective, not the interrogator. And then number four, hold your limits with a strong spine and a soft heart. Now listen to me carefully, because I do not want you to hear something I'm not saying.

An empty tank explains the behavior. It doesn't erase the limit. We're not saying, "Hey, you had a hard day, so you can throw your shoe at me." We are saying, "I understand why this is happening. I'm not gonna take it personally, and we still don't throw things in the car." Strong spine, soft heart. Both. Always both. And one more thing that goes with this, do the teaching later, because a flooded brain cannot learn.

It just can't. The lecture you give at 3:20 goes absolutely nowhere. And if there's something that needs to be addressed, address it at 5:00 or 7:00 when everyone's tank has come back up. The limit is held in the moment, the teaching happens later. Okay, before I let you go today, two things I want you to try this week.

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Let's call it homework. Number one, for a full week, zero questions the first 10 minutes in the car. Zero. I know this might feel impossible, but I want you to do it anyway. Be warm, be quiet, have a snack ready, and just notice what happens. Number two, notice what you are doing in the 90 seconds before you see your kid or kids.

Are you triggered? Are you on your phone? Are you taking a phone call? Are you scrolling? Are you already irritated about something from your own day? Are you rushing to the next thing? Are you late every single day and you're dysregulated because of that? Because the truth is, your kid is not the only one who's been wearing a backpack all day.

You've been wearing one too, and two bulging backpacks in one car is a rough ride. Yeah? Yeah. And then there's this, the part I really want you to carry with you. On the day when they get in the car screaming and you're exhausted and have nothing left either, I want you to remember what actually just happened.

Your kid held it together for roughly seven hours, seven hours of sitting still, waiting their turn, swallowing the hard thing, following the rules, holding the feelings. At their age, that is not nothing. That is enormous. And when they see your face and they finally let it go, they don't fall apart because you're doing this wrong.

They're falling apart because they made it to you, and you are the safe place. And in that moment, what I want you to remind yourself is that they're not giving me a hard time, they're having a hard time, and the after-school meltdown is real. Yeah? Yeah. 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.