

Ep. #299: When Your Kid Has Big Feelings—But You Still Have to Go



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 absolutely thrilled to be with you here today, and I want to start today's episode by asking you to picture something. Let's say you have to be somewhere. Not eventually, not later. You need to leave now, right now. You know the feeling, and maybe it's because one of your kids has soccer practice in 12 minutes.

Maybe you're trying to get everybody out the door for school. And let's say the baby is already strapped into the car seat. You've got the water bottles. You've got the backpacks. You've got the shoes. You've got the snack that somebody absolutely had to have and will probably not eat, and then one of your kids stops.

"I don't want to go," he says, or, "I'm scared," she says, or, "I'm too shy." Or maybe they just melt down because the blue water bottle's dirty and apparently no other water bottle on the planet Earth will do. And you can feel the clock ticking. Tick, tick, tick, tick. I'm not very good at special effects. And as a result of the clock ticking, you feel your body getting tighter.

Your jaw is clenching. Your shoulders are coming up closer and closer to your ears. And somewhere in the back of your mind, you're hearing every piece of peaceful parenting advice you've ever learned, especially from me. You're hearing, "Validate the feeling. Hold space. Co-regulate. Don't rush. Get curious."

And you're thinking, Lisa, that sounds lovely, but we gotta go, woman. Yeah. Yeah. If you've been there occasionally or a lot, that's what we're talking about today because I believe this could be one of the biggest misconceptions about peaceful parenting. That if we honor our kids' feelings, we have to wait until the feeling is gone before life can move forward.

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And I'm here to tell you, you don't, not one bit. Your kid or kids can be disappointed, and we can leave for soccer. Your kids can be nervous and walk into school. Your kid can be furious that screen time is over, and the screen can still turn off. Your teenager can think the curfew is really stupid And still have a curfew.

Your kids get to have the feeling, and sometimes we still have to get on with it, right? Right. I think parents often believe they have two options in these moments. Option one is ignore the feeling and force the action. "Come on, get up. We're leaving. Stop crying, you're fine. Just drink out of the red water bottle."

And as a result of this, maybe you threaten, maybe you yell, maybe you pick up the little kid, you throw them over your shoulder, and you carry them to the car while they're kicking and screaming. Okay, that's one end of the spectrum. Not a huge fan of that, but that's one end. And then there's the other end.

Also not a fan of this one. You say to yourself, "My kid is so upset, so everything has to stop until they're okay." We can't leave yet because they're disappointed. We can't get into school because they're nervous. We can't hold the limits because they don't like them or they're angry. We can't move forward because they haven't finished processing their feelings.

And that, my real world peaceful parent, is not capital N, capital O, capital T. That is not peaceful parenting either. I know peaceful parenting sometimes gets lumped into a category that some people wanna call gentle parenting, and then somebody makes an Instagram video making fun of it. The kid says, "I don't wanna go to school," and the imaginary gentle parent yells, "Oh, sweetheart, I hear that you don't want to go to school."

We'll stay home until your nervous system tells you you're ready." No, that's not what this is all about here. That is not what I believe in or teach or work with you on. Peaceful parenting is not a family democracy where everybody has to emotionally approve the plan before you move forward. Honoring a feeling is not the same as allowing the feeling to make every decision.

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Let me say that again. Recognizing and honoring a feeling is not the same thing as allowing the feeling to make the decision. The feeling gets to exist and the requirement can still exist. Strong spine, soft heart. Soft heart is, "I believe you, you're nervous. I get it. I can see it." And the strong spine part is, "And we're working our way to school today."

Soft heart, "Oh my gosh, you love being at the park and having so much fun right now." And the strong spine part, "It's time to go." Soft heart, "I can see you are really angry that your phone is turning off." Strong spine part, "And the phone needs to be checked into the kitchen because it's 8:30." Both. Both, my friend.

Both. Not one or the other, both. And the inspiration for today's episode came to me in such a beautiful way on one of the Hive calls last week. I've changed the name of the family members and a few identifying details for privacy, but the story is so good I couldn't wait to share it. James is a dad that I coach, and he has three kids.

His oldest son, Charlie, recently switched from one school to another across town. And Charlie, who's pretty little, he's six, was having some big feelings about going back to the playground at his previous school. He knew three of the kids that were playing on the playground this particular day. There wasn't a playground full of strangers, but there was something uncomfortable for Charlie about going back to his original school's playground.

Maybe embarrassment, maybe uncertainty, maybe the feeling of, "Do I belong here?" And you know how kids will sometimes use one word because they don't have 12 paragraphs to explain what's going on inside them. So on this particular day, Charlie's word that he used was shy. So picture this. It's an afternoon.

James has Charlie, his younger son, and the baby in the car, so all three kids. And Charlie has an appointment- for an assessment with a math tutor that James really wants him to begin going to. And step one is to come to this appointment where the tutor is gonna s- assess his math skills. So James, the dad, arranges for the assessment to happen right after school, and they're pulling up to the playground, to the original school, and the timing is tight.

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Charlie looks over and he sees the three kids on the playground, and he immediately says to Dad that he doesn't wanna get out of the car. "I don't wanna get out of the car." Now, on the drive over, he was pretty excited about going to meet the math tutor, but he sees the three kids from his original school playing on the playground, and suddenly he says, "I'm not getting out of the car."

James, the dad, asks why, and Charlie says, "Because I'm too shy." Okay? And they're tight on time, and they need to make it to this appointment on time. So now James, the dad, has an objective. The objective is to get Charlie out of the car, walk into the building, and take the assessment, right? Meanwhile, he's got a younger kid and a baby in the car, and a schedule, and things he needs to do.

So James, the dad, does not have unlimited time to sit in the parking lot and conduct a three-hour emotional retreat. And as he's sharing all this with me, James says something during the coaching that I thought was so incredibly insightful. He said he noticed this tendency in himself to want to, in his words, smoosh the feelings so he could move on and get more things done.

And as he's sharing this story with us inside the hive, I stopped him for a second because I don't actually think he was trying to smoosh Charlie's feelings. He wasn't saying to his kid, "You're not shy." He wasn't saying, "You have no right to feel that way." He wasn't saying, "Stop feeling nervous." What James wanted was for Charlie to change the action he was taking while he felt shy.

Can you hear the distinction? Because this is big. Charlie was saying, "I feel shy, therefore, I can't get out of the car." And the parenting opportunity becomes, "Okay, you get to feel shy. I totally hear you. How do I get you out of the car while shy comes along with us?" That's the dad's assignment in that moment because maybe we don't get rid of the shy.

Maybe we don't have time. Maybe she can ride along with us. Maybe nervous can come with us. Maybe disappointment can come to soccer practice, and angry can accompany you while you check the phone in the charging station in the kitchen. Maybe frustration can come with you while you go out and come home with a 10 o'clock curfew.

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We don't have to make the feeling disappear as the parent before we take the next step. We don't. That's peaceful parenting. Now, here's where this story gets even better because as he's telling us the story, James is sharing with us inside the hive that he, too, was getting dysregulated. And I mean, come on, of course he was.

He has three kids. There's a baby in a car seat that could start crying at any moment. The clock is ticking. There's an appointment that we need to get to, and Charlie won't get out of the car. Now, James has been in the hive long enough to know that yelling is not going to help. He knows physically forcing Charlie out isn't what he wants to do at all.

And he also doesn't want to give up on the assessment and turn around and go home because he wants the assessment, and also he knows that it's not gonna solve this emotion for Charlie the next time. And what James shares with us is that in that moment, he froze. And what James shares with us is in that moment, James doesn't know what to do. He's kind of flabbergasted as to what his next step is.

So he steps away, a couple steps away from the door being open, and goes, kind of stands near the front of the car. Not far, he's still right by the car, but he basically steps away and says to himself, "I don't know what to do right now." And when he told me this inside the hive, he described it almost like he had frozen, like he had failed to come up with the peaceful parenting answer.

And I said to him, "Wait. I actually think your body knew exactly what you needed. You were in that moment dysregulated or on your way to being dysregulated, so you stepped away. You gave your nervous system a moment. You decided not to yell, not to threaten, not to force, and instead, you created a little space."

And James' face lit up, and he remembered something when he created that space. He remembered that Charlie loves airplanes. He remembered that airplanes are incredibly regulating for his son. Charlie had actually suggested earlier that they go home and get one of his airplanes before the math assessment, and James told him, "We don't have time to do that."

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We're already close to the place we need to go to for the math assessment, and going home would take extra time." But now in this moment when he stepped away and takes some deep breaths, James begins to think, "Do I have paper?" He remembers he does. He has a piece of paper sitting in the front seat of the car.

So he makes Charlie a paper airplane on the hood of the car, and Charlie sees it, and he gets out of the car, and he starts playing with it, and then they move forward. I want to tell you, I absolutely love this story because James didn't come up with the paper airplane when his nervous system was yelling, "We are late.

Get out of the car right now." He came up with it after he got enough regulation back in his body to regain access to his higher brain, also known as his thinking brain. Not perfect regulation. He didn't take a 20-minute meditation or go lay down in the back of the car and deep breathe. He did enough to gain access to his higher brain, enough regulation to see an option that wasn't available to him 30 seconds earlier.

The truth is, fast is not always efficient, and this brings me to something James said that I've been thinking about ever since. He said, "The ironic thing is that the efficient response sometimes feels like you force your kid to do it, or you yell, or you move them along physically. Get it done." And yeah, that can look efficient, especially when kids are little.

You can physically pick up a four-year-old. You can put their shoes on them while they're wiggling around. You can buckle them into the car. You can sometimes overpower a kid into doing what you want them to do for now, for a while, and then that window closes, right? I mean, if you have a 14-year-old, you know.

The fact that control can produce fast behavior does not necessarily mean it's teaching anything useful, and sometimes the thing that looks slower is actually much more efficient. Taking 30 seconds to regulate yourself may save 20 minutes of fighting. Two minutes helping your kid transition may save a 40-minute storm.

And sometimes James was realizing maybe driving 10 minutes home to get the airplane would actually have been more efficient because the alternative might be sitting in the parking lot for 35 minutes with two dysregulated nervous systems.

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Fast and efficient are not always the same thing. I want you to remember that because parents today are under so much pressure.

There's so much to do in regular life, let alone in your parenting life. Get your kids dressed. Get them fed with organic, grass-fed, no bad oil, well-prepared fresh food. Get them to school on time. Get yourself to work. Get the soccer practice scheduled, get the oranges and drinks bought and cut up, get them to practice on time, get home quickly, make dinner, again, another amazing meal served on the table, do homework, bath, teeth, books, bed, and then do it all again tomorrow.

There are a million invisible tasks in just parenting alone. And when we're under pressure, speed starts to feel like the only goal. But sometimes the 30-second pause is the shortcut. Sometimes regulation is the efficiency tool. Sometimes, I dare to say always, but I'll even give you sometimes. Later in our coaching, James brought up something else He described these little moments when Charlie starts to share something.

Sometimes it's his bedtime. Sometimes it's while brushing his teeth. And James used this image that I thought was so beautiful. He said, "It's almost like a tiny flower pushing through the ground. There's this little emotional opening. Charlie starts to tell his mom and dad something, and then the wheels of life come rolling through.

'Come on, buddy, finish brushing your teeth. We gotta get to bed. Let's go.'" And sometimes James realizes afterwards, "Oh, no, he was trying to tell me something, and I missed it." And then when he circles back, the flower's gone. Charlie doesn't want to talk anymore. And listen, I want us to notice those flowers and tend to them.

I do. I want us to slow down enough that we don't bulldoze through every emotional opening our kids give us. And you're gonna miss some. You are. I miss them. You're gonna miss them. We all are. Because raising kids in a real house, I mean, come on, there's a lot going on. There's dinner cooking, the baby's crying, there's homework, there's teeth that actually do need to get brushed.

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There's another kid who needs you. There's a bedtime that needs to be targeted so our kids get enough sleep. And sometimes you'll realize 20 minutes later, shoot, that was a moment, and you missed it. And hear me loud and clear, that's okay. I promise. The goal is not to notice everything. The goal is to notice more.

Notice more, not everything. You do not have to be perfectly attuned to every emotional bid your kid makes in order to have a deeply connected relationship with them. I think this is another place where parents accidentally create a new impossible standard for themselves. They learn peaceful parenting and suddenly believe, "I have to catch every feeling."

I have to validate every feeling. I have to respond perfectly every time my kid opens up. I need to stop everything and be there for them. I need to have enough capacity all the time." No, no, no, and no. That's not real. That's not parenting. That's perfectionism wearing a peaceful parenting T-shirt. And I'm not interested in that for you or your kids at all. So as part of this coaching session, James asked me, "How do we know, Lisa?"

How do I know when to slow down and hold space? And when do we need to move? I've got the teeth-brushing example," he says, "and I've got the math tutoring example." So I thought about it for a moment, and I gave him an analogy from my corporate days. Imagine you're working in a hospital, and you're the nursing supervisor in the ER, and you're sitting with one of your nurses that you supervise, and they're upset over something.

Maybe they're having a hard day, maybe something happened with a coworker, and you're actively listening as the supervisor. You're holding space for them because their feelings matter. And then let's say a patient comes into the hospital with an earache. Okay. The earache matters. We're going to take care of it for the patient.

But the supervisor doesn't have to jump up in the middle of the sentence and scream at the nurse, "Sorry, earache. Conversation over." Right? Now imagine a different patient comes in and they're code blue. That's a d- whole different situation. The nursing supervisor and the nurse are on the move. The conversation

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stops, not because the nurse's feelings suddenly become stupid, not because the supervisor doesn't care, but because the code blue requires action.

The moment requires action, and that is peaceful parenting. Sometimes you've got an earache to deal with, and sometimes you've got a code blue. And no, I'm not telling you to start ranking your kids' feelings from one to 10. The point is, use judgment. Ask yourself, "What does this moment require? Do we actually need to move?"

Is there an appointment Is there something we need to move towards, like school in the morning, or soccer practice, or the math tutoring? Or am I acting like this is an emergency because I'm uncomfortable? That's an important question. Sometimes the urgency is real. School door closes in four minutes.

Plane is boarding. The other kid has to be picked up. The doctor will cancel the appointment, and we really need to see him, so we really need to go. And sometimes the urgency is us. I want this over. I don't wanna watch my kid struggle. I'm impatient. I'm embarrassed because other people are watching. I didn't leave enough transition time, and now everybody is paying for my stress.

Those are different. Real-world peaceful parenting requires us to figure out which one we're dealing with. This is art and science, not just science. There isn't one script. There isn't one response. There isn't one exact number of times you're supposed to validate before you're allowed to say, "And now we're going."

We learn to read the moment, right? We learn to be in our higher brain while we're parenting in these moments, so we can figure out our next best step. So let me give you three things to practice. Number one, separate the feeling from the action. Ask yourself, "Am I trying to stop my kid from feeling something, or am I guiding what needs to happen while they feel it?"

This is huge because if your goal is to make your kid stop feeling mad, well, good luck. Make them stop feeling disappointed, again, good luck. Make them stop feeling nervous, good luck. Feelings don't work like light switches. But behavior, we can guide the behavior. "I hear you. I can see that you're really nervous about

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walking onto that playground," soft heart, "and we're going to go over there," strong spine.

Then you can say, "How can I help? Do you want me to walk beside you? Do you wanna hold onto my pant leg? Do you wanna bring the airplane? Wanna go around the side instead of through the big group?" Notice what we're doing. We're not negotiating whether the thing happens. We're looking for support around how it happens.

That's peaceful leadership. Number two, check the urgency. Earache or code blue? Do I really need to move my kid right this second, or is my nervous system trying to make everything urgent? And listen, sometimes your answer's gonna be, "Yes. Yes, we really need to go." Excellent. Then go. Your kid is allowed to hate it.

You don't need to stand there until they enthusiastically say, "Thank you, Mommy or Daddy. I've now fully processed my disappointment, and I'm ready to transition." Because let's be honest, that may never happen. So you move with kindness and confidence, without shaming them for having their feeling, but move.

And other times you're going to realize, "No, we actually have two minutes, and I can sit here, and I can hear this, and I can slow down, and I can let the flower come up." Both, my friend, both are peaceful parenting. And number three, regulate enough to see the next move. Enough, that's the word. I'm not gonna ask you to achieve inner peace in the Target parking lot.

I'm asking you to get enough regulation back that you realize you have choices. James stepped 15 feet away, and those steps helped him regulate enough to realize that he could build a paper airplane for Charlie, which was his soother. When Malcolm was growing up and I would get dysregulated, sometimes I would say, "I need to go to the bathroom."

No human is ever gonna tell another human they don't have to go to the bathroom. I would go in the bathroom, put the lid down, and I would just sit on the toilet, door closed, feet on the floor, a couple big, deep breaths in, a couple dragon breaths out. Afterwards, I would wash my hands. I find washing my hands to be an incredibly regulating tool for myself.

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And then I would come back and resume the conversation from a regulated place in my higher brain. Was that some beautifully designed nervous system protocol? Probably not. My body was usually saying, "Get out of here for a minute before you say something you're going to regret." And it worked. Real-world regulation for you might be to turn around for 10 seconds, take five drinks of water, walk to the end of the driveway, unclench your jaw, drop your shoulders, and say, "I need a second to think."

Because sometimes the only thing standing between you and a paper airplane solution is enough regulation to see it. And here's where I think this becomes about something bigger than getting out the door ahead of time. What are we ultimately trying to teach our kids? That they can only do hard things when they feel comfortable?

Of course not. We all know life doesn't work that way. You and I do hard things while feeling uncomfortable all the time. You walk into a meeting nervous. You have the difficult conversation scared. You apologize embarrassed. You go to the funeral heartbroken. You start something new feeling uncertain. You do something that matters while your stomach is doing flip-flops.

Emotional regulation is not, "I have learned how to make uncomfortable feelings disappear." Emotional regulation is, "I can feel uncomfortable and still function. I can feel uncomfortable and still choose. I can feel uncomfortable and survive it. I can be disappointed and stay there. I can be nervous and walk in.

I can be angry and keep my body safe. I can be embarrassed and try again. I can be shy and use my paper airplane to help me g- get to the tutoring appointment on time." This is why I call this wor- Real World Peaceful Parenting, because we're not parenting in a laboratory. We're not parenting in a quiet room where everybody is rested and fed and we have unlimited time.

We're parenting with babies in the car. We're parenting while somebody needs to be picked up. We're parenting while dinner burns. We're parenting at 7:42 in the morning with one shoe missing. We're parenting while our own nervous system is saying, "Ah!" Real world parenting, Real World Peaceful Parenting isn't

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bulldozing over the feeling, and it isn't stopping real life until the feeling goes away.

It's learning how to hold both. I see you. I care about the feeling. I'm not scared of the feeling. I'm still the leader, strong spine, soft heart. Your kid does not benefit nor need you to make every feeling go away. They need to know that when the hard feeling comes, you're their safe place. You won't be scared of it.

You won't shame them for it, and you also won't teach them that life has to stop until it passes. Yeah? Yeah. And by the way, after James made the paper airplane, Charlie played with it for a couple minutes, and then they got to math tutoring on time. I want that for you, and I want that for your kids. 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.