Ep. #305: You've Asked, I've Answered: How to Hold Limits Without Power Struggles



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 glad that we're together here today. Now, I want you to picture this. It's 8:15 on a school night You've had a long day, dinner's done, and you've answered roughly 12,000 questions, and your kid is still on their phone. Now, the rule in your house is clear.

Phones get put away at 8:00 on school nights. Thanks to previous podcast episodes of mine you've listened to, you've made the rules clear, first with yourself, and then with your kids. You've talked about it, you've signed a contract, and your kid knows the rules. So you say, "Hey, it's time to put your phone away."

And you get, "Just five more minutes." So then you say, "No, honey, phone time ended at 8:00." And your kid says, "But I'm in the middle of something." And you say, "I understand. I hear you, but it's time." And then you get the, "That's not fair. Everybody else's parents let them stay on their phones later." And bam, your heart starts pounding.

You can feel yourself getting irritated. So then you start explaining. You explain why sleep matters, and your kid argues that they're not tired. Then you remind them of the agreement, and they tell you that the rule is stupid, and suddenly you're defending a rule you've already discussed and agreed upon, like you're in court.

And after another 10 minutes of arguing, you finally say, "Fine, five more minutes, but that's it." And just like that, the arguing stops, and you feel relieved, and your kid gets five more minutes. But here's what I want you to notice. You had a rule. It was thoughtful and realistic. You communicated the rule.

Your kid pushed back, and the rule got changed, not because you reconsidered whether 8:00 was reasonable, not because some new information came along, but because you wanted the arguing to stop. Been there? I know I have. We've been

talking about discipline, teaching, and consequences in the past few episodes, and today, today I wanna talk about the ingredient that makes those things actually work over time, and it is, drum roll please, consistency.

I've said for years that rules, limits, and consequences help kids feel loved, safed, and know what is expected of them. Think about how reassuring predictability is. You know what happens when you get to a red light. You know what happens when the restaurant closes. You know which door to use to enter your workplace.

Those expectations help you move through your day without having to figure everything out from scratch. Yeah? Well, kids need that kind of clarity at home, too. They need to know what the rules are, which limits matter, and whether Mom and Dad is going to follow through, and how often. Not because we want little robots who never question us, not because a kid shouldn't have an opinion.

But because predictable leadership gives them something solid to count on. And listen, I know this isn't always easy. I've raised a kid myself who's now 22, and like me, many of you are raising very strong-willed kids. And as we know, they have opinions. Oh, do they have opinions. They ask why. They challenge the rule.

They notice every exception. They are extremely committed negotiators. I get it, but here's what I want you to hear. We can adjust the support without automatically abandoning a reasonable limit. Now, let's go back to that phone rule. Suppose Tuesday night, you tell your kid it's time to put the phone away at 8:00 PM, and they ask for five more minutes, and you say, "No, honey, it's past the time."

And they argue, complain, and keep pushing, and eventually you give in. On Wednesday, you say no and mean it. The phone gets put away at 8:00 PM. On Thursday, you say no, but this time after 15 minutes of arguing, you give them another 10 minutes. Now, at the end of the week, I want you to look at What is your kid learning about the 8:00 phone rule?

Well, if we can look at this objectively, what we'll see is they're learning that sometimes 8:00 means 8:00. Sometimes 8:00 means 8:15 or 8:30, depending on how hard they're able to push you, not necessarily because they're consciously

manipulating you. What is happening is they're learning from experience that sometimes the answer changes.

And here's what's so important to understand. When pushing back sometimes works, your kid has a reason to keep pushing back, and we, the parents, are the ones who are unintentionally teaching them that. Not because we're bad parents, not because we don't love our kids, but because we haven't been consistent.

And here's the other half of the learning. What is your brain learning? What your brain is learning that when you finally say yes, the complaining stops. Your shoulders drop, the house gets quiet, and you get immediate relief, while they get five, 10, or 15 more minutes. So your kid receives a possible payoff for pushing, and you receive a possible payoff for giving in.

It's a cycle that can become very well-practiced even when nobody intended to create it. Let me say that again in a different way. Sometimes we change the answer not because we've decided the answer was wrong, but because we can't tolerate the reaction to the answer, and that's the part I wanna work on today.

Your kid or kids can think a rule is unfair. They can be disappointed. They can cry. They can wish you were a different parent for the next 20 minutes, and you can still hold a reasonable limit with love. Strong spine, soft heart. The strong spine says, "We're not going to the store tonight," and the soft heart says, "I know you really wanna go, and I know it's disappointing."

You don't need to make the feeling disappear. You don't need to convince your kid to love your decision, and you don't need to become angry just because they're angry. Now, I wanna be very clear. Being consistent doesn't mean being mean or rigid. If your kid offers new information that changes the circumstances, listen.

If a limit was unrealistic, own it. If your kid is sick or overwhelmed or needs an accommodation, respond to the actual need. Flexibility based on good judgment- Is not the same as giving in to escape comfort, and you're allowed to negotiate when negotiation is appropriate. I want your kids to learn respectful advocacy.

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I want them to be able to say, "Can I make a case from a different point of view?" I mean, that's a useful life skill. But when the decision is made, we don't have to keep retrying the same case night in and night out. Make sense? Okay, I wanna tell you about a family I've coached. I've changed the names, relationships, and some details to protect their privacy.

This mom has a teenage kid who loves to make spontaneous plans. The kid might ask to stop for a treat on the way home, or go shopping now, or make a last-minute trip somewhere, and sometimes the mom is fine with it. However, sometimes she's exhausted from a long day and truly doesn't have it in her to get back in the car.

So one evening, the teen wanted to go out and buy something, and the mom said no. And the kid asked why, and the mom explained. And then the kid asked again, and the mom gave another reason, and then another. And soon they weren't talking about whether they could go to the store, they were arguing about whether the mom was being fair, whether another family member got special treatment, whether the mom ever did anything nice, and why a simple request had become such a big deal.

Maybe you've been there. At times, these conversations are stretched and stretched until Mom loses her cool and yells, and then she feels guilty. And the next time the request comes, she's already bracing for the argument. Sound familiar? What we discovered in coaching was that this family didn't just need a better way to say no, they needed consistency.

Because sometimes Mom was willing to drop everything and go to the store. Sometimes she wasn't. Sometimes she gave one explanation. Sometimes she gave five. And sometimes the conversation went on so long that everybody ended up frustrated. And here's something I want you to understand about this situation.

The problem wasn't that the mom occasionally said yes to a spontaneous request. There's nothing wrong with that. The problem was that nobody really knew what to expect. So we talked about creating some predictability. For example, instead of deciding whether to make an extra trip to the store every single time the request came up, the mom could establish a simple expectation.

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We're happy to plan shopping trips ahead of time, but we're not making spontaneous trips on school nights. Now everybody knows what to expect. So when the request comes in at 8:00 at night, the mom doesn't have to defend herself for 20 minutes. She can acknowledge what her kid wants, "Oh, sweetheart, I know you'd love to go to the store tonight.

I get it. And remember, we plan our trips ahead of time, and tonight's a school night, so we're not going tonight, but let's figure out when we can go." And if her kid keeps pushing, the mom can calmly say, "You've asked, and I've answered. I know you're disappointed, and the answer isn't changing." Strong spine, soft heart.

The goal isn't to make the kid happy about the answer. The goal is to be loving, clear, and consistent. Loving, clear, and consistent. Does that make sense? Let me tell you about a time I got this wrong when Malcolm was young. Years ago, we had driven several hours to spend a weekend with friends. We had a hotel booked, and we were excited to see everybody When we arrived, Malcolm was having a really hard time cooperating, and I remember saying something like, "If you don't behave, we're gonna get right back in that car and go home."

Now, he was really little, and this was before I got onto Peaceful Parenting. And at the time, as soon as the words came out of my mouth, I knew, what are you doing, Lisa? We're not gonna get back in the car and go home. We had just driven hours in the car. We had made plans. There was a booked hotel that was non-refundable, and I knew that I wasn't gonna follow through on that threat, and it wasn't even a clear expectation.

Behave? I mean, what did that even mean to a little kid who had just spent hours in a car? Not to mention, it's just a word, behave. What does it even mean? And what I can tell you now is that I had reached for a big consequence because I wanted immediate control, but I'd thrown something out that I didn't really intend to follow through on, and that's a lesson I want to spare you from learning the hard way.

Don't announce a consequence just because you're frustrated. Choose something you can actually be consistent with, that you can follow through on, and make sure the expectation is clear and reasonable in the first place. I tell you that story not because I always got it right. Lord knows I didn't. I tell it because I learned that my

words had to become something Malcolm could trust, and over time, I built that trust with him through one thing and one thing only, and that was consistency.

Now, let's talk about what happens inside us when our kids push back. For one parent, the hardest thing is the noise. Maybe this is you. The whining or yelling feels unbearable, and your brain says, "Just make this stop now." For another parent, it's the guilt, and maybe this is you. The brain says, "I worked hard all day, and I've hardly seen my kid.

Maybe I should just say yes." For another parent, it's fear. Maybe you fall into this group. If I don't give in, they're going to explode and ruin the whole evening, or ruin the vacation, or ruin where we're going, and I'm not sure I can handle that tonight or this week. For another, it's the belief that a good parent always has a happy kid.

So when the kid is unhappy, the parent starts doubting everything, including themselves. Which one are you? I'd love to know. Now, I want you to hear me. Your kid's disappointment is not evidence that you're doing something wrong automatically, and your own discomfort is not an automatic instruction to change the limit.

And this is where the real work of peaceful parenting comes in. While this is happening, I want you to notice the hot feeling in your chest. You notice the story that says, "They don't respect me," or, "I'm being mean," or, "They'll explode, and the whole evening will be ruined." And you use that to regulate yourself.

You remember why you chose the limit when you were calm and regulated. You remember that it's a good idea for kids to be off the phone at 8:00, or the electronics, that you thought that out, that you had done your research, and you believe when you're calm and regulated that that limit matters. And then in the heat of the moment, you hold it without turning the situation into a battle of wills.

Now, I realize that sometimes the answer should change. I get that. If the original limit was unfair, if you misunderstood the situation, or if your kid has a legitimate need you overlooked, then you reconsider. What matters is why you're changing it.

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Is it thoughtful leadership, or is it an attempt to make everyone, including you, stop feeling uncomfortable?

That's what I want you to ask yourself. In the heat of the moment. Now, I know some of you are thinking, "But Lisa, you don't understand. I have a very strong-willed kid, and when I say no, they don't just ask one more time. They argue, they negotiate, they get angry. Sometimes they have a full-blown meltdown."

And my answer is, I hear you. I get it. I coach parents all the time that bring this exact argument to me, and here's what I want you to understand. Your kid can be furious about a limit, and the limit can still stand. Your kid can think your rule is ridiculous, unfair, and completely unreasonable, and you can still hold it.

You don't need your kid to agree with the limit in order for you to be consistent and follow through. You don't need to convince them to be happy about it in order for you to be consistent. The path to consistency is to stay regulated, acknowledge their feelings, and hold the reasonable limit with a strong spine and a soft heart.

Because here's the thing about strong-willed kids. They may push harder and argue longer and have bigger reactions when they don't get what they want And that makes our consistency even more important. I beg you to hear me on this. And it's not because we need to win a battle of wills. It's because our kids need to know that our love is steady, our r- leadership is steady, and our limits don't disappear because they're upset.

That's how we build trust in our word. That's how they begin to trust that we're going to be consistent. And remember, rules help kids feel loved, safe, and know what is expected. Make sense? Okay, let me give you three things to practice this week. First, decide what you can realistically hold. Don't start by making 14 new family rules.

That's a disaster waiting to happen. Choose one or two. Make them age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate, and get clear about what happens next when the rule is followed and what happens when it isn't. And please don't threaten them to do something you have no attention or ability to follow through on.

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Kids need to know your word means something. Second, connect before you redirect. Acknowledge the want. You really wish you could stay longer. I know you'd love five more minutes. I get why you're disappointed. Then communicate the limit clearly as an and, not an or. You can be warm without giving a 12-minute closing argument.

If the conversation turns into repeated asks and repeated answers, you can kindly say, "At this point, you've asked and I've answered. The answer is still no, and we're done with this conversation for today." And third, practice staying regulated through their reaction. Now, this is probably the hardest one.

Notice your urge to lecture, defend, threaten, or change your mind. Put both feet on the floor to help you. Take a breath. Breathe in, drag and breathe out. Remind yourself- My kid can be upset and I can stay steady. Resist the urge to match their intensity, and resist the urge to erase their disappointment.

And if you don't get it right tonight, it's okay. Repair, own your part, and try again tomorrow. Consistency isn't perfection. It's a pattern you're building through repeated follow-through. In closing, here's what I want you to take with you today. Your kid doesn't need you to make every disappointment disappear.

They need to learn that disappointment is something they can get through, and they need to know that your love doesn't disappear when the answer is no, or when they get mad about the no. When you hold a reasonable limit with a strong spine and a soft heart, you're not simply ending an argument. You're giving your kid an experience of steady leadership.

You're showing them that two people can disagree, have big feelings, stay connected, and still move forward. 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.