Ep. #306: Your Kid's Struggles Are Not Your Parenting Report Card



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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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 honored to be with you today, and I want to begin today by talking about something that I think almost every parent experiences at some point in their parenting journey, and yet I don't think we talk about it nearly enough Those seasons when parenting just feels really, really hard.

You know what I'm talking about. Maybe your kid is struggling at school. Maybe they're having a hard time with friendships. Maybe your teenager is pushing back on every single thing you say. Maybe it's that your kids are fighting constantly. Maybe your child is having big feelings, big reactions, big explosions, and you feel like you're spending your entire day helping everybody return to regulation.

Or maybe it's you. Maybe you're yelling more than you want to. Maybe you're losing your patience. Maybe you're triggered by things that didn't use to bother you. Maybe you're exhausted, frustrated, overwhelmed, and wondering, what the heck's going on? And here's what I find happens to so many parents in these moments.

Instead of looking at what's happening and getting curious, we start turning the struggle into a judgment about ourselves. We start s- thinking things like, what am I doing wrong? Why can't I figure this out? I've been working on my parenting for X amount of years now, two, five, 10. Why am I still struggling?

I know I've thought this in the past plenty of times. Why does everybody else's kid seem to be doing so much better than mine? And then we get to the really painful thought. Maybe I'm just not a very good parent. Have you been there? Oh, my friends, if you've ever had that thought, I really want you to listen to today's episode in its entirety because I want to offer you an entirely different way to think about the difficult seasons of parenting.

Ep. #306: Your Kid’s Struggles Are Not Your Parenting Report Card

And I don't just want you to feel better about what's happening. I want you to learn how to look at these moments through a different lens, a lens that allows you to see what's actually happening, learn something valuable, take responsibility where you need to, and make meaningful changes. Because here's what I want you to know.

A difficult parenting season is not your final grade. Your child's struggle is not your parenting grade. Your imperfect reaction is not your parenting grade. A hard week, hard month, or even a hard year is not your parenting grade. What it is is it's information. And when we learn how to use that information instead of using it against ourselves, we can become so much more effective as parents.

That's what we're talking about today. Now, I want you to think about something for a moment. Let's say your kid comes home with a report card, and there's a grade on that report card that's not what you or your kid were hoping for. Maybe it's a D in math. Now, ideally, what do we do with that information?

Well, for most of us, we get curious. We might say, "Hey, what's going on in math?" Are you understanding the material? Are you turning in assignments? Is something happening in the classroom? Do you need extra help? Are you having trouble managing your time? Is there something about the way the material is being taught that isn't clicking for you?

We might even talk with the teacher. We might look at the assignments. We might decide some tutoring would be helpful. We use the grade as information to figure out what needs attention, right? Now, imagine instead of that, we looked at our kid and said, "Well, you got a D in math, so clearly you're a failure as a human being."

I can't even say that with a straight face. We would say, "You're never going to amount to anything. You should have figured this out by now. What is wrong with you?" I mean, can you imagine? And yet, my friend, isn't that exactly what so many of us do to ourselves when parenting gets hard? Our child is struggling, we give ourselves an F.

Our child is making mistakes, we give ourselves an F We're losing our patience, we give ourselves an F. Our kid isn't listening or cooperating or doing what they think they should be doing, and suddenly we're questioning our entire ability to

parent. Now, I want to be really clear about something. I'm not suggesting that our children's behavior is literally a report card on our parenting, because it is not.

Our children are their own human beings. They have their own personalities, temperaments, developmental timelines, challenges, strengths, thoughts, feelings, and experiences. And there are plenty of things happening in their lives that have absolutely nothing to do with how we're parenting them. But I do think the report card analogy is helpful because it reminds us that when something isn't going well, we can, and often should, stop and assess.

We should gather information. We should look at what's happening. We can figure out what might need to change without turning the whole thing into an indictment of who we are as parents. And I want you to think about that. Something might need to change. There might be something we need to learn. There might be something we're doing that's contributing to the problem.

There might be an expectation that we need to adjust or a boundary that we need to hold differently. But that does not mean we're failing. The struggle might be telling us something, but it's not telling us everything about who we are as a parent. And I think this is where so many parents get stuck.

Because we move into judgment, we stop being curious. And when we stop being curious, we lose access to some of the most important information that could actually help us. So I want to teach you something today that I teach parents in the Hive and in my private coaching all the time. I want you to put down the gavel and pick up the magnifying glass.

I want you to stop being the judge and start being the detective. Now, if you've been listening to this podcast for any length of time, you've heard me talk about being a detective, and here's why I love this concept so much. A detective doesn't walk into a scene, a crime scene, let's say, and immediately decide what everything means.

A good detective investigates. He or she asks questions. They gather facts. They look for patterns. They consider different explanations. They're willing to discover that their first assumption may not have been correct. And most importantly,

they're interested in understanding what's happening so they can figure out what to do next And that's what I want for you as a parent.

That's what I want for you. Let's say you're in a really hard season with your kid. Maybe your kid is having a difficult time with transitions. Every time you ask them to stop doing something they enjoy and move on to something else, they explode. They argue, they scream, they refuse, they get angry, and this is happening over and over again.

Now, the judge might say, "Oh my gosh, my kid is being so disrespectful. They should know better. Why do I have to fight with them about everything? I can't believe we're still dealing with this. I'm obviously doing something wrong, because other parents don't seem to be having these problems." Well, notice what happened there.

We've taken the kid's struggle and immediately started assigning meaning to it, meaning about the child, meaning about ourselves, meaning about our parenting. But have we actually figured out what's going on? No, we have not. We've just created a whole bunch of thoughts about what's going on. So what would the detective do?

The detective would get curious, and my friend, there are so many different things we might discover when we start looking at a parenting struggle through the eyes of a detective. Let me give you just a few examples. Sometimes what's happening with our kid is bringing up something from our own childhood.

Maybe your kid talks back to you, I mean, really talks back. Maybe they say something hurtful, or they roll their eyes, or slam a door, or tell you that you're the worst parent in the world, and something inside you just explodes. Your whole body gets activated. You're furious, you're offended, you're hurt, and your brain is screaming, "Nobody is gonna talk to me like that."

Now, of course, we wanna teach our kids how to communicate respectfully. Yes. And I'm not suggesting that we just throw our hands up and say, "Well, anything goes." But as detectives, we might get curious about why that particular behavior

activates us so intensely Maybe you grew up in a home where disagreeing with an adult was considered disrespectful.

Maybe you grew up in a home where you weren't allowed to express your anger. Maybe you were shamed or punished when you had big feelings. Maybe you learned that respect meant complete obedience. And so now when your kid pushes back, your nervous system responds as though something much bigger is happening.

And this struggle might be showing you that an old wound needs your attention and some healing, not because you're a bad parent, but because you're a human being who had a childhood, and that childhood is sometimes going to show up in our own parenting. And that's valuable information. And once you can see it as a detective, you have an opportunity to work on it.

Does that make sense? Okay, and another example. Let's say your teenager isn't doing their homework. You remind them. You've talked about it. You've explained why it matters. You've tried to help them organize their assignments, and they're still not doing what you think they should be doing. And you have the thought, "They should know better by now."

Or you have the thought, "If they don't get this together, they're never gonna amount to anything or be successful," or, "I've clearly failed to teach them responsibility." Now notice, as a detective, how you feel when you're thinking these thoughts. Are you calm? Are you curious? Are you open to figuring out what's happening?

Probably not. You're likely frustrated, scared, irritated, or defeated. And from that emotional state, what do you do? Well, maybe you lecture. Maybe you yell. Maybe you remind them 17 times. Maybe you start telling them that their entire future is gonna look awful if they don't turn in that assignment. Maybe you punish them or threaten to take something away, and now you've got two dysregulated people trying to solve a problem, and that problem-solving is probably not going very well.

Ep. #306: Your Kid's Struggles Are Not Your Parenting Report Card

But here's the thing. We don't actually know that the teenager is going to be unsuccessful. We don't know that we failed to teach them responsibility. We know that right now they're struggling to get their homework done. That's the fact, and that fact is something we can work with We can get curious about what's getting in the way of completing the homework.

Is it motivation? Is it organization? Is it overwhelm? Is it avoidance? Is it the work is too difficult? Is there something else happening that we don't know about? Now we're in a position to actually help because we're being a detective. This is why I talk so much about thought work, because what we make the struggle mean affects how we feel, and how we feel influences how we show up, and how we show up has an enormous impact on what happens next.

This is a big one, and this came up in a coaching conversation I had recently. We were looking into a situation where a parent was incredibly frustrated because their kid wasn't meeting an expectation, and the more the kid struggled, the more frustrated the parent became. The parent was looking at this situation through the lens of, "My kid won't do what I'm asking."

But as we started talking and investigating as a detective, we began to consider a different possibility. What if the kid wasn't yet capable of consistently meeting the expectation in a way that the parent was asking? What if the issue wasn't simply willingness? What if the child needed more support, more practice, a different structure, and an opportunity to develop the skill?

Well, that changes everything. Because if I believe my kid can do something and is simply refusing, I'm going to respond one way. But if I recognize or believe that my kid doesn't yet have the capacity or the skills to do it successfully, I might respond very differently. And I want, or I'm gonna say need, to make a really important distinction here.

Adjusting expectations doesn't mean we have no expectations It doesn't mean we eliminate boundaries. It doesn't mean we decide our child never has to learn to do hard things. Not at all. It means we get realistic about where our child is right now and what they need to become more capable. We basically become a detective.

Ep. #306: Your Kid's Struggles Are Not Your Parenting Report Card

Maybe the expectation stays the same, but the support changes. Maybe we need to break the task into smaller steps. Maybe we need to teach a skill that is missing. Maybe we need to practice when everybody is calm. Or maybe we genuinely need to adjust the expectation because it's not appropriate for this child's developmental stage or capacity.

Think about how much suffering we can create when we're repeatedly demanding something a child isn't yet equipped to do. And think about what changes when we stop demanding better performance and start asking what might help our child become more successful. That's the detective at work. And I want you to notice something else here.

Sometimes our parenting struggle is revealing something about our kids' skills. Sometimes it's revealing something about our own expectations. Sometimes it's revealing something about our own emotional regulation, and sometimes it's all three. And that's why we want to investigate as a detective. We do not, absolutely do not, want to decide what the answer is before we've actually investigated and looked at the problem.

Maybe we've been reminding our kid constantly instead of helping them develop a system. Maybe we've been rescuing them every time something gets uncomfortable. Maybe we've been setting boundaries but not following through. Maybe we've been explaining and explaining and explaining, hoping that if we just find the perfect words, our kids will finally cooperate.

Or maybe we're trying to solve every problem in the middle of a meltdown when our kid's thinking brain isn't available for the lesson we're trying to teach. There may be a pattern that needs to change, and that's okay We can look at it honestly, and we can say, "You know what? This isn't working. I need to do something differently."

That's not a confession of failure, that's parenting. And sometimes, my friends, the detective discovers that nothing is particularly wrong. Sometimes life is just hard. Sometimes our kid doesn't make the team, doesn't get invited to the party. Sometimes they have a friendship that falls apart. Sometimes they're disappointed.

Ep. #306: Your Kid's Struggles Are Not Your Parenting Report Card

Sometimes they make a mistake. Sometimes they have a difficult season for reasons we can't control. And our job isn't necessarily to fix the struggle. Sometimes our job is to walk beside them while they figure out how to navigate it. Because we're not here to raise kids who never struggle. We're raising human beings who are learning how to live in a world where struggle is part of the experience, and so are we.

Now, I want to share something personal with you. I'm recording this episode in the middle of a hard parenting moment in my own life. Malcolm's 22, and I want you to know something. Hard parenting moments don't magically disappear when our kids become adults. I know. Shocking, right? You don't get to their 18th birthday, throw your hands in the air, and say, "Well, that was fun.

My work here is done." Nope. The relationship changes. The roles change. The kind of things you navigate change, but you're still a parent, and you still love this human being with your whole heart. And sometimes your heart's going to hurt. Sometimes you're gonna be disappointed. Sometimes they're going to be frustrated with you, and sometimes you're gonna be frustrated with them.

Sometimes our adult kids are going to upset us. Sometimes you're going to wish you could wave a magic wand and make something easier for them, and sometimes you're gonna have to sit with the discomfort of knowing you can't. Here's something I find really interesting about my own parenting journey. Even when I'm going through a difficult season, I don't spend my time questioning whether I'm a good parent.

I really don't, and I want to tell you why. Because I don't spend a lot of time thinking about whether I'm a good mom or a bad mom in the first place. In fact, I say this to my clients all the time. We're not good or bad parents, we're parents. Let me say that again. We're not good or bad parents, we're parents, and we're raising human beings.

Malcolm is, uh, his own soul, here to have his own experience He's going to make decisions. He's going to have feelings. He's going to succeed at things. He's going to struggle with things. He's going to make mistakes. He's going to have wonderful

moments, and disappointing moments, and frustrating moments, because that's part of being a human, and I'm his mother.

I'm his guide. I'm here to love him, and support him, and connect with him, offer perspective, and help him when help is appropriate. I'm also here to set boundaries where boundaries are needed, and I'm here to do my own work as a human being and a parent. I'm not here to control his entire human experience, and his experience is not my report card.

When Malcolm is clicking on all cylinders, and when things are going beautifully for him, and when he's succeeding and doing all the things that make a mother proud, I don't give myself an A in parenting. I do not. I don't walk around thinking, "Look at me. I'm an amazing mother because my kid is doing so well."

He's doing well. That's his experience. And of course, I'm happy for him and I'm proud of him, but I don't turn his success into a grade about me. And on the flip side, when he's struggling, or disappointed, or frustrated, or making decisions that I might not m- make, I don't give myself an F. His struggle doesn't automatically mean I've done something wrong.

His feelings don't automatically mean I've failed. And this is where I think staying neutral about ourselves as parents becomes so powerful. Now, I wanna be clear about what I mean by neutral. I don't mean indifferent or detached. I don't mean I don't care deeply about what happens in my son's life, because believe me, I care.

I care so much that my heart hurts sometimes, and especially when his heart hurts But I can care deeply without making every outcome mean something about me. And I can honestly look at how I'm parenting without turning it into judgment about my own worth. Sometimes I make mistakes. Sometimes I wish I'd handled something differently.

Sometimes I need to pause, collect myself, rethink my approach, and/or repair. And when that happens, I want to and I do take responsibility. I want to look at what I did, I want to figure out what I can learn, and I want to do better, but I don't need to declare myself a bad mom or give myself an F in order to make a change.

Ep. #306: Your Kid's Struggles Are Not Your Parenting Report Card

And I don't need to declare myself a good mom in order to feel okay about myself. I'm a mom. I'm doing the work of parenting. I'm learning, I'm growing, and I'm helping guide another human being through his own life. And I think there's so much freedom in this mindset, so much freedom. Because when we're not spending all of our energy deciding whether we're good or bad parents, we have so much more energy available to actually parent.

We can be present. We can be connected. We can listen. We can take responsibility. We can make changes. We can show up with a strong spine and a soft heart, and we can stop making every hard moment a referendum on who we are. So let's make this really practical, because I don't want you to listen to this episode and think, "Oh, well that sounds nice," and then go back to doing exactly what you've always done.

I want you to have something you can use, and here's what I recommend. The next time you're in a hard parenting moment, especially if you notice yourself slipping into judgment, I want you to get curious about three things. First, what is actually happening? Not what does it mean, not what does it say about me, not what does it say about my kid, but what actually happened.

Let's say your kid refused to get ready for school You asked them to put their shoes on and they didn't. You reminded them, they got angry. You started feeling frustrated. You raised your voice, and they yelled back, and now everybody's upset, and you're late. Okay, those are the facts. But then notice how quickly our brains want to add a story.

My kid never listens. Every morning's a disaster. I can't even get my kid out the door. I'm terrible at this. No, my friend, let's look at what actually happened. Your kid had difficulty getting ready for school this morning. You became frustrated. The interaction escalated. That's what we know. That we can work with.

Which brings us to the next question. What might this be showing me? And this is where we put our detective hats on. Maybe your kid needs a different morning routine. Maybe they need more time. Maybe they're overwhelmed by all the steps involved. Maybe they're distracted by having the TV on in the morning.

Ep. #306: Your Kid's Struggles Are Not Your Parenting Report Card

Maybe mornings are difficult because they're not getting enough sleep. Maybe there's something going on at school. Maybe your expectations aren't realistic for where your child is developmentally. Maybe there's too much time in the morning, and then all of a sudden, everything speeds up and gets rushed, and they're not able to speed up with you.

Maybe you've gotten into a pattern of over-reminding, and your kid has learned to wait for the tenth reminder before taking action. Or maybe you're starting every morning feeling rushed, anxious, and that's contributing to the escalation. I mean, there are so, so, so many possibilities. And here's what I want you to understand.

We don't have to know the answer immediately. That's part of being a detective. We get curious. We observe. We gather information. We ask questions. We look for patterns. And sometimes the answer isn't one thing. It's a combination of many things. Now, here's the third question. What do I do next? Not how do I fix everything?

Not how do I become a completely different parent by tomorrow morning? But what's one thing I want to do next? Maybe you have a conversation with your kid when everybody's calm. Maybe you create a checklist. Maybe you adjust the bedtime. Maybe you need to stop reminding 17 times and begin helping your child develop more independence.

Maybe you need to apologize for yelling. Maybe you need to work on your own morning routine so you're not rushing around or starting the day feeling overwhelmed. Maybe you need outside support to help you understand what's happening, which I offer on the regular. Whatever it is, choose something productive, something intentional, something that moves you forward.

And I want to point out something really important here. We can take responsibility without taking all the blame. Those are not the same thing. If I yell at my child, I want to take responsibility for yelling. If I lose control and/or frighten my child, I need to acknowledge the harm, take the steps to ensure safety, and repair when possible, and get additional support if needed.

Ep. #306: Your Kid's Struggles Are Not Your Parenting Report Card

I don't want to minimize that I don't want to pretend it didn't happen, and I certainly don't want to blame my child for my behavior. But I also don't need to decide that one mistake defines the entirety of who I am. I want, I want to look honestly at what happened and make meaningful changes. Yes, that's what responsibility looks like.

That's what growth looks like. Now, I want to come back to something I said at the beginning of today's episode, because I know there are parents listening right now, and you might be one, who've been working on their parenting for a long time. Maybe you've been practicing these skills for months. Maybe you've been doing this work for years.

You've been learning to regulate yourself. You've been practicing connecting before redirecting. You've been working on your thoughts. You've been learning to hold boundaries. You've been repairing when things go sideways. You've been really intentional about the kind of parent you want to be, and maybe things were going pretty well, and then something changed.

Your child entered a new developmental stage. Something difficult happened in your family. Your teenager started struggling with something you haven't encountered before. Or maybe you're dealing with more stress, less sleep, or more responsibility than you were six months ago, and suddenly parenting feels hard again.

And you're thinking, "How did I end up back here? I thought I was doing so much better." Well, I want you to hear this. A hard season does not erase your progress. It doesn't. The fact that you're struggling today doesn't mean everything you've learned has disappeared. The fact that you lost your patience this morning doesn't mean you forgot how to regulate yourself.

Or the fact that your kid is having a hard time doesn't mean all the connection you've built has vanished. Sometimes we think progress means we should stop having problems, that once we've learned enough, practiced enough, and worked on ourself enough, parenting should somehow become easy. But that's not how parenting works, because we're raising, growing, changing, developing human beings, and we're humans too, and life keeps h- happening.

Ep. #306: Your Kid's Struggles Are Not Your Parenting Report Card

New challenges come. Old triggers show up. Circumstances change. We get tired. Our kids get overwhelmed. We run into situations we haven't faced before. I want you to think about progress differently. Maybe progress is that you recognize your trigger a little sooner than you used to. Maybe progress is that you still sometimes yell, but you recognize it now, you take responsibility and repair rather than pretending it didn't happen.

Maybe progress is that you notice the thoughts that send you into a spiral, or you pause long enough to ask yourself what's really happening before you react. Those things matter. Sometimes progress isn't visible in our child's behavior right away. Sometimes the progress is happening inside of us. It's our ability to stay regulated, tolerate difficult feelings, remain curious, to keep showing up even when things are hard.

And I think it's so important to recognize, because if the only way we measure our progress is by whether our kids are behaving the way- or the way we want them to behave, we're gonna miss so much of the growth that's available to us and happening for us. Remember, peaceful parenting isn't about creating a life where nothing difficult ever happens.

It's about developing the skills to navigate real life, the messy life, the disappointing life, the beautiful, frustrating, complicated experience of being human that includes all hard seasons. So here's what I want to leave you with today. The next time parenting gets hard, I want you to notice what your brain does.

I want you to remind yourself that parenting has hard seasons. You can take the exit ramp. You can pause. You can get curious. You can ask yourself, "What's really happening here?" And none of that requires us to decide whether we're good or bad parents. We're parents. We're raising human beings. We're gonna get some things right and some things wrong, and we're gonna have hard seasons, and through it all, we have the opportunity to remain curious, take responsibility, learn, and grow.

I want that for you, and I want that for your kids, because a hard parenting season is not your final grade. You can put down the report card altogether and get back to

the work of parenting. Yeah? Awesome. 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.