



The Neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting

Dr Laura Markham

Interviewed by Dr. Laura Markham

Dr. Laura Markham (00:04):

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(00:10):

Hi there. I'm Dr. Laura Markham, founder of Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids, and organizer of this summit, Nurturing Hearts, Nurturing Minds: The Neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting. As we wrap up this summit, I've created a bonus interview for you with myself. Because I want to share with you what I think are the most important neuroscience findings for parents to keep in mind as they consider the neuroscience behind Peaceful Parenting. So let's start by asking Dr. Laura Markham what is the neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting?

(00:51):

I'm so glad you asked me that, and I'm so glad to be here with you today to talk about the neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting. Neuroscience is simply the study of the brain and the nervous system, so the neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting is simply reviewing what we know about the brain science behind the Peaceful Parenting approach.

(01:12):

Before we talk about the brain science behind the Peaceful Parenting approach, can you tell us a little more about what is the Peaceful Parenting approach?

(01:21):

Peaceful Parenting is a relationship-based approach. Three big ideas. One, connection. The parent-child relationship is the most important thing in parenting. It's not a set of strategies. It's a relationship. Two, self-regulation. Unless we as the parent can regulate ourselves well enough to show up in an emotionally generous way with our child, we can't create that safe, soothing relationship that children need to thrive. And finally, third big idea, coaching. We're not trying to control our child with punishment or threats or even rewards. We are giving our child the support they need to meet our expectations and to thrive. That's it. Three big ideas. Peaceful Parenting. Self-regulation by the parent, connection with the child, coaching.

(02:17):

But parenting is complicated, right? Why those three big ideas?

(02:22):

Well, first of all, because the research suggests that these are the factors that matter most in raising healthy children. Connection with the child, self-regulation by the parent, and supporting the child, how we support them. And second, because in my many, many years of coaching parents, I've observed these three factors are the ones that most help families transform. In other words, it works. These three guiding ideas taken together give children what they need to thrive.

(02:54):

Okay, great. I just wanted to make sure that parents who are watching and listening know at least a little bit about what Peaceful Parenting is before we talk about the neuroscience. So now, could you please explain to us what do we need to know about the neuroscience behind Peaceful Parenting?

(03:11):

There are so many research studies over the past 60 years that support these three big ideas. But now, neuroscience shows us what's happening in the brain and nervous system when we use this approach.

(03:27):

So for instance, we know that healthy attachment is the foundation of all child development. Until children feel safe and secure and seen and connected, until they trust their parents to meet their needs, to soothe them when they're upset -- those are the components of healthy attachment -- until that happens, the child can't actually thrive. They can't relax. They can't learn. They can't cooperate with us. They can't handle normal development and the age-appropriate developmental tasks

that life will put on their path. That's very well substantiated research over many, many decades.

(04:07):

But now, research on the nervous system shows us what's happening at a biological level. So for instance, the baby cries, the parent soothes them. One of the contributions of Polyvagal Theory, developed by Stephen Porges, is the idea of neuroception, which is the observation that every human nervous system is continuously monitoring whether we feel safe or not. Continuous bombardment of cues, right? When we feel safe, our normal state is connection. When we don't feel safe, the nervous system shifts into protection mode. This is true for adults and it's true for kids and it's true for babies. So that crying baby is calling for someone to come and keep her safe. Now, we've known for decades that when she learns that someone will reliably come and soothe her, she will become more able to soothe herself. And we've thought of that as learning. But now brain researchers are able to explain how that learning happens. It's actually a change in the brain.

(05:11):

One thing that happens... And there's a lot going on. One thing that happens is that as the baby is soothed, she's developing a network of nerves that fire together to help her calm down, giving the signals to her entire nervous system to calm down. This network is associated with the parent who's providing the protection and the soothing. This neural net though, is inside the baby herself, and she will increasingly be able to activate it herself to calm herself down, even when the parent is not nearby. So we know that the child learns to calm herself over time. What we didn't understand is that her brain is actually changing to enable her to calm herself down over time.

(06:01):

But why does it matter to us what happens in the baby's brain? We know that she's learning to soothe herself when we soothe her. That's great. We're going to soothe her. But what does that change in how we relate to the child?

(06:16):

Well, I think the big breakthrough here is that we're realizing that children actually can't calm themselves down without adult help until they've experienced enough reliable, soothing that their brain develops the capacity to do this. And that doesn't happen in early childhood. It happens later. And for some children it takes a longer time because of that unique child. Maybe they're super sensitive and it's harder to calm them, for instance.

(06:48):

So the big breakthrough here we've been calling co-regulation. And I think understanding co-regulation does change everything in how we parent. For instance, we've realized that when a child is dysregulated, that's about the nervous system. It's not that the child's being difficult. It's not that the child even needs to learn the skills to calm themselves down, which is how we've often talked about it in the past. The fastest way to help the child's nervous system settle down is for a regulated, responsive, soothing, warm adult to provide safety for the child. And when that happens enough, the child's brain will respond by being able to soothe itself. But the brain needs repeated, repeated, repeated experiences before it will change.

(07:43):

So remember, this is one of the three big ideas of Peaceful Parenting. Parents need to self-regulate or they can't provide safety to their child. Parental regulation is how the child internalizes the co-regulation that's being offered by the parent, that ability to soothe themselves and help themselves feel safe.

(08:05):

And of course, Polyvagal Theory and the other neuroscience research also highlights the other two big ideas in Peaceful Parenting. Now that we understand more about how the nervous system works, we realize that everything in parenting is indeed about connection, which is our second big idea. And we also see why the third big idea is so important. Coaching instead of controlling. Because feeling controlled is a danger cue for all human beings, while coaching is how we give the child the support they need, that meets their needs, so they can thrive.

(08:41):

So co-regulation just means that the parent calms themselves down, soothes the child, and that helps the child feel safe. And that gets repeated over and over and over and over. And eventually the child develops the brain wiring to calm themselves. Is that right? But then what about those times when we don't calm ourselves down and we lose it with our kids? That happens to every parent. Are you saying that we're hurting their brain development?

(09:09):

No, I'm not. The brain changes with repeated experience. Every parent, as you say, loses it with their child sometimes. If that's an isolated occurrence and you make a repair afterward, kids are resilient, they can handle those isolated incidents, and they can even learn from our repairs. They can learn that all relationships will have bumps, but can be repaired and made stronger. And in the end, they will learn they

can count on you and their brain will learn how to soothe itself from the times when you do soothe them.

(09:45):

So just keep trying to improve your ratio of showing up as the parent you want to be. And remember, it's all about support. Giving ourselves support is what changes our own brains and allows us to show up as the calm, patient parent that we want to be.

(10:02):

That's actually really empowering for parents. Thank you. Okay, so what are the other neuroscience findings that you think it's important for parents to understand?

(10:12):

Well, I think one of the things that's been most eye-opening for me is understanding the nervous system research about connection versus protection mode. Now, we've all heard about fight or flight, which we know is going into protection mode. But one of the big contributions of Polyvagal Theory has been the observation that when the nervous system is not triggered into protection mode, when it's in a normal state, it's in connection mode. And this has so many implications.

(10:45):

So first, let's just think about kids. This means that when a child feels safe, they're in connection mode. They laugh, they play, they want to contribute, to help, to cooperate. That's their natural state. But as I mentioned, when kids don't feel safe, when they're in protection mode -- they're in fight, to fight off that threat, or flight, to run away from that threat, or freeze, to play dead so the threat won't get them -- the rest of the brain and nervous system, the stuff they can access when they're in connection mode, that goes offline. They can't learn. They can't cooperate. When the nervous system is in protection mode, everything has to focus on reestablishing safety. So the parts of the brain that relate to the immune system, digestion, learning, it's all partially suspended. The alarm system, the amygdala, high alert.

(11:47):

So when the child is in protection mode, they are ready to fight, flight, flee, or freeze and play dead. But they're not ready to do the things that they're called upon to do in their life, where they have to do what the teacher or the parent or somebody else is asking them to do. They're not even ready to play. And they can't learn. And of course, this is not where we want our children to be spending much of their time, in protection mode.

(12:21):

Now, you may be wondering how often is your child actually in protection mode? How often are they in danger? We used to think that the nervous system would only shift from connection to protection when somebody was actually in danger. You don't go into fight or flight if there's no reason to. But now from studying the nervous system, we know that a person can feel unsafe even when objectively they are completely safe.

(12:50):

Remember I mentioned neuroception, which is the nervous system continuously scanning for cues of safety or danger. Deb Dana, who has adapted Polyvagal Theory to trauma treatment, says that the nervous system is always scanning inside us, outside, and between, meaning between us and our significant others. So the nervous system isn't just scanning the environment for cues of danger, it's also scanning inside our own bodies, and it's also scanning what's going on between us and important others.

(13:24):

In the child's case, that's the parent, since that's the person they depend on for survival. So maybe the child notices loud voices on the television. That's an external cue of danger. Or maybe the parent is stressed and distracted, so the child perceives them as being a little dangerous. They perceive that as a danger. And that's a between cue. Or the child might feel increasingly hungry, and if you get hungry enough, that's a danger too. Or the tag in the shirt keeps roughing their neck and they look at the parent and the parent is warmly interacting with their sibling. Remember, our nervous systems are constantly scanning for something that is currently dangerous or could become dangerous. Most cues are a future danger. It's not that there's a tiger right there, it's that we heard a noise in the brush.

(14:18):

So, that's every cue about what's going on inside us, outside us, or between us and someone else. And it even includes cues of danger from the past. So, anything that felt scary in the past. So if the child, let's say they had a medical experience where they fell down and got cut and they had to get stitches in their arm. Now every time they fall down or every time they see blood, if that was a hard experience for them, for some kids it isn't, for some it is, and it depends a lot on lots of factors. But let's say that this child was traumatized by their medical experience. Now anything medical could be reminiscent of that and could trigger their nervous system. Simply being sick could trigger their nervous system and make them feel like they're in danger.

(15:10):

So from what you're saying, our child could be in protection mode often. Is that true?

(15:16):

Well, yeah. We evolved to survive. That means that all day long, every day we're all moving in and out. We're in connection mode, and then we're in protection mode. When we get a cue of danger. A bus goes by, roars by us as we're walking down the street and we flinch a little and then we know we're fine, we relax, we're back in connection mode. A healthy nervous system is able to rev up to meet the demands of a dangerous situation of any kind, or a possible dangerous situation, and then to settle back into a state of wellbeing, and wellbeing always is going to include connection.

(15:58):

Unfortunately, one of the results of our modern lifestyle is stress, and stress is feeling that we're under threat in low-grade danger. And we often feel stressed all the time. Many of us do not live in our natural state of wellbeing of connection, of warmth, of playfulness, and emotional generosity. Many of us spend an awful lot of time in protection mode. And of course that happens to our child too. There are all kinds of things that can stress our kids, from the bully on the school bus to their sibling on your lap.

(16:33):

But how do we know kids are in protection mode? They can't usually be in fight, flight, or freeze. That would be pretty obvious to us, right?

(16:43):

That's true. One very important new understanding from nervous system research is that when the nervous system shifts into protection mode, it doesn't always look like fight or flight, which is extreme activation. Sometimes it looks just a little activated. We can be in low-grade protection mode, like someone who's out of sorts, grumpy, irritable, hangry. That's not someone feeling safe and connected and playful. That's someone who's feeling some kind of threat.

(17:13):

So were you saying that the times when your kid's just in a bad mood, when they're grumpy and negative and nothing you do is right, they're in protection mode? Or when they get defiant with you, or when they try to pick a fight with their sibling, is all that protection mode? Like it's fight or flight, but they're only a little ways toward fight or flight. They're not actually starting the fight or actually freezing or running in the other room or whatever?

(17:44):

Yes, exactly. When we're in a state of wellbeing, we're not picking fights with our sibling or anybody else, right? That's a nervous system that doesn't feel quite connected, soothed, safe, settled. It feels a little worried. If you've followed me for a while, you've heard me say that children do well when they can. We're now seeing the science behind that. Because when a child's nervous system is dysregulated, they actually can't cooperate until their nervous system can shift back into a state of wellbeing. When they're like that, they need to assert control, which will help them to feel safer. Or they demand something that they think will help them feel less dysregulated, like screen time or sweet treats. Or they show you just how upset they are and how threatened they feel. "Don't get too close to me." They throw something across the room.

(18:45):

What the neuroscience is showing us is that all misbehavior comes from a dysregulated nervous system. And I want to add that all of our misbehavior, our less-than-skillful parenting behavior, also comes from a dysregulated nervous system. When our children are dysregulated, it's very natural for us to get dysregulated too. And even if our children are in a perfect state of wellbeing, we have so many stresses on us as parents that it's easy for us to get dysregulated. And you don't have to be very dysregulated when you're in protection mode to be radiating that you're not completely in a good place, that you're not completely safe and connected. When we are dysregulated, we're unpredictable. And that means we're signaling to our child that we are not regulated, we're not predictable, we're not there for them and responsive. So the minute we get dysregulated, often our children respond by getting dysregulated themselves, unfortunately.

(19:51):

So it would be great if when they get dysregulated, they could just shift themselves back into regulation, but really, we're the grownups. That's on us to do. And they may not yet have the brain capacity even to do it.

(20:04):

Now, I want to add, some adults did not get parented well when they were little, and some adults are still working on shifting themselves back. But I have seen many, many, many thousands of parents who have learned to self-regulate. So I'm telling you, the brain science is there to back this up, that any repeated experience can change the brain, and there's huge numbers of studies at this point that show that self-compassion is one of the most important things you can do to shift yourself back into a state of wellbeing. That's why in this summit we talked to Kristin Neff, who is the originator of all of the research on self-compassion.

(20:48):

And self-compassion isn't the only thing we can do. We can develop regular mindfulness practices. And again, we talked to Dr. Chris Willard, we talked to Hunter Clarke-Fields in this summit, because those are tools that you can use to retrain your brain. Mindfulness retrains the brain and allows us to shift ourselves back. So, very important for any parent listening to this to know that if you find it challenging to stay in a state of wellbeing, you're not alone. That's the human condition. We're always receiving cues of danger that shift us out of wellbeing and into alert protection mode. But the minute we notice that, when we're mindfully aware of our own experience, or when we have practices that we use on a regular basis during our days, we can shift ourselves back into connection mode. And then we can show up the way we'd like to for our children. And also, we deserve it. It's so much better for our own health and wellbeing to be in connection mode instead of protection mode.

(21:53):

I am excited about the research that you're always citing that says that even 30 days of a mindfulness practice can change the way the brain is wired. That's really exciting to know that we can change our own brain. But I'm still thinking about what you said a minute ago, that the child is in protection mode, low-grade protection mode, so we don't know they're in fight or flight, but then they're demanding the iPad or the candy or they hit their sibling or start a fight or they throw something across the room. We can't just let them act that way, even though it's something that's happening with their brain and nervous system being dysregulated, right? So what does it change to know the brain science about this? They're still misbehaving, and we as the parents still have to figure out how to deal with that.

(22:44):

No, of course not. We're not going to let our kid hit their sibling and throw things across the room. What we are going to do though is recognize that this is not a bad kid. They're not intentionally being difficult. They're not intentionally giving us a hard time. And how we intervene is therefore not to threaten them or to insist that they know better. Sure, they knew better yesterday, but they weren't dysregulated yesterday. So our intervention now is going to take a different shape. We know what they need. They need to feel safe.

(23:19):

So the very first thing that we're always going to do is what we've always been saying in Peaceful Parenting, number one, self-regulation for the parent. We're going to calm ourselves down so that we can provide a sense of safety to the child, and the child can begin to get those cues of safety, can trust that we're handling things, that

we've got this, that the parents here on duty. We're there. They're safe. They can calm down. They don't have to be in protection mode ready to fight.

(23:55):

Okay. But I still need to ask, because I know that parents watching us are wondering this, why on earth does my child feel so unsafe at this moment? They are not in any danger. Maybe I'm just setting an ordinary limit, "Time to turn off the video game," and my kid goes ballistic.

(24:17):

Okay, that's a great example. Let's take that situation. We just told our kid to stop playing the video game and get ready for bed. There's certainly no danger there. But for the child, often the removal of the video game is a threat to their emotional balance.

(24:35):

Think about when you're watching something on the screen that you're totally involved with, and suddenly someone gets between you and the screen and turns it off. You feel an immediate... Well, you feel anger, but there's a reason. Underneath the anger is your immediate loss of that thing that you were connecting to. You're hugely disappointed. That's followed very quickly by the anger, or at least the irritation. And you know why? You've been plunged into a state of threat because you just lost something that you were valuing at that moment. But luckily, you're an adult and you quickly regroup. You realize there's no actual threat, you adjust to the situation and you handle it in an adult manner.

(25:17):

But your kid does not have a fully developed brain. They feel all the disappointment you feel times 100. Plus, their ability to adjust to the situation as you just did, that's going to depend on whether they've received enough co-regulation in the past from you and internalized that. In other words, how good are they at calming themselves down when they face disappointment? You know the answer to that. You know your kid. Some kids, they can roll with the punches. Many kids, not so much. It is very hard for them to calm themselves down when they're disappointed.

(25:57):

Now, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Are you saying it's my fault if my kid can't self-regulate?

(26:03):

No, not at all. Every child is different. Some kids are super sensitive. It's much more challenging for them to calm down. So, calming them is more of a challenge for the

parent no matter how hard you worked at it when they were a baby and no matter how hard you work at it now. I'm just saying that until the brain has enough experience with being soothed by the parent, it doesn't internalize that co-regulation and learn to do it for itself.

(26:36):

So, every child will eventually, hopefully, get enough soothing to learn to do that. It's better when the brain is younger because the brain is changing very, very quickly in the first five years, and then it's still changing very quickly for the next five years, and it's still changing, not as quickly, over the next... from age 10 to age 25. And the truth is, as we know, your brain is changing even now with repeated experience. It's just that things will take longer. If I start to try to learn a new language today, it's never going to be quite the same as if I learned it when I was three.

(27:16):

And that's true for self-regulation as well. So even if I had never been soothed and I was a bundle of... always in protection, nervous system anxiety, and I was always in protection mode, if I had enough experiences of connection and soothing, I could learn to shift gears out of protection mode and into connection mode. But of course, as an adult, it would be much harder for me.

(27:42):

So we want kids to have the experience of being soothed as much as possible, as early as possible. But it's never too late for you to learn to soothe yourself or for you to offer soothing to your child. It's nobody's fault if somebody has a hard time calming themselves down. It might mean that they just had a harder time learning it because of their unique wiring. That if I'm somebody who's always on high alert, it's going to be a lot harder for me to be soothed. And it may be that for whatever other reason, when your child was a baby, they didn't get enough experience of being soothed. But that's okay. You can do that right now. You can do it today. As long as we know that what our child needs when they're upset is that experience of soothing, we can work on it anytime with them.

(28:38):

And that includes with fifteen-year-old, by the way. It's going to be different. You can't pick them up and soothe them, but you absolutely can adopt a soothing tone, a soothing presence, calm yourself down before you engage with your fifteen-year-old, which is always a good practice with any fifteen-year-old anyway. Because in fact, teenagers brains are changing, and teenagers are often a little bit dysregulated. The teenage brain tends to be a little bit dysregulated. So, important

for us with teens to show up as regulated as possible to maintain a good relationship with them.

(29:16):

But the truth is it's probably great for us to be in a state of wellbeing and connection any time, all the time for our own wellbeing and also for the benefit of any relationship we're in and any person we're interacting with. We can't do that. We can't be a hundred percent on. But we can improve our ratio and we can get better at calming ourselves down, noticing when we're not in a connection, and calming ourselves down, giving ourselves what we need. Support is what works, not beating up on ourselves. Give ourselves what we need, and then we can shift ourselves into a state where just naturally we'll be able to provide what the other person is needing so their regulation, their nervous system can readjust and become more regulated.

(30:08):

Okay, I love that you keep talking about how this will make the parent happier, the parent's ability to self-regulate and how it's hopeful that parents can in fact teach themselves this and retrain their brains. Love it. But I'm still back with, I turned off that video game and my kid went ballistic and I don't know what to do. Can you help us out here?

(30:32):

Yes. Right. So remember, they can't yet regulate well enough to remind themselves it's not an emergency. They're not that adult who can adapt to the situation. This is a child who's totally dysregulated and disappointed and they feel like it's an emergency. So they're triggered. They're responding as if it's an emergency. They go into protection mode. Usually they're fighting. Sometimes they'll run away from you or they'll shut down and go into freeze, like playing dead. Often parents tell me their kid gets so furious, it's like something else takes over. Like it's not even their own sweet kid. One mom told me it's like her son is possessed when he gets like this.

(31:14):

Remember, in protection mode, the connection part of the brain just goes offline. The frontal cortex, the reasoning ability, it goes offline when the child is protecting themselves from what they perceive as a dangerous situation. You're not thinking well when you're running away from the tiger. All you're doing is trying to save your life. So when this happens with your kid, they can seem unreachable, because in fact, the connection system has shut down. It's hard to connect with them. The protection system has taken over, and they are going to do whatever is necessary to protect themselves, which at this moment, their wellbeing seems completely tied up in

maintaining access to that video game so they have to protect their access to that video game, as crazy as that sounds to you and me.

(32:05):

Okay, I believe you that this behavior is not just my kid giving me a hard time or being disobedient. I'm willing to believe that my super sensitive kid cannot tolerate the disappointment of my turning off the video game, and their brain has not yet able to soothe themselves, and they've moved into protection mode. I understand that I need to work with their triggered nervous system. But I need to turn off the video game. So we're still back to the million-dollar question. What are we supposed to do?

(32:38):

When anyone else is dysregulated, what you do is create safety. So first you make yourself non-threatening, remove any cues of danger, and then you connect with your child, which reinforces their feeling of safety. Remember I said earlier that the fastest way to regulate a child is for the parent to be regulated. This is the basis of the first two ideas of Peaceful Parenting, self-regulation and connection. It's the basis of all co-regulation.

(33:08):

When I was trained, a lot of years ago, we called that the child borrowing the parent's ego function. The parent is calm and regulated. The child can borrow our ego function. But now the nervous system researchers explain how it works. They say if the parent's upset, by definition, they're not safe for the child to be around. They're unpredictable. They could respond to the child in anger. But when the parent is self-regulated, they're radiating calm, patience. They're in charge. They're going to handle things. They're signaling to the child that they're not a threat, and not only that, they'll protect the child from any other threats. So your self-regulation is the first thing that you do, and connecting with your child is the second.

(33:53):

But this is in the moment. I actually think we need to go back in time a little bit to set up the situation a little better, because if you've been following me for a while, you know that you're already in the breakdown lane by the time your child is going ballistic. What you want to do... When you're in the breakdown lane, it means you didn't fill your car up with gas and get your tune-up and you're in the breakdown lane. You've got limited options now. So let's go back to our intervention opportunities before when we had a chance to get a tune-up or when we had a chance to fill the car up with gas.

(34:24):

The intervention opportunity with this screen time problem is, first of all, before you turn on any screen or let your child turn on a screen, you always have an agreement with your child about how it's going to go off. The screen does need to go off. It's going to be hard for them. They're going to feel really disappointed. How are they going to handle those tough feelings? Will they want a snack at that point? Should you turn on the music and have a dance party with them? Don't expect your child to move from the screen, which is so enjoyable for them, to something they don't like, like, "Turn off the screen and come brush your teeth for bedtime." It's hard enough to turn the screen off. You need something transitional that they can look forward to that's going to help them at that difficult moment, because it's going to be hard for them to regulate.

(35:13):

Then, also an intervention moment, you always give your child a warning before the screen goes off. With a kid who goes ballistic, you're going to obviously need more than one warning. You're going to have a few warnings. So all of these things are preparing the nervous system that it's going to be hard, but it's not going to be a total emergency. So the nervous system's still get a little dysregulated, but the frontal cortex is still going to be online enough, because it won't be that dysregulated yet, that you'll be able to talk to your child and say, "Remember, we have a plan. It's all okay. It's all safe. We're going to turn on the music and have a dance party, and you are going to show me that new move." So you're always creating safety.

(35:59):

Then when it's time for the screen to go off, again you're creating safety by giving your child a sense of agency. Being out of control is a major trigger for the nervous system, because when we're out of control, we could be in danger. So we want to give our child some sense of agency, some choice. Do they want to be the ones to turn off the screen themselves or do they want you to turn it off while they turn their attention to the snack that you're bringing in?

(36:24):

One great way to reground the nervous system is a snack. I know that sounds a little bit funny. It doesn't even have to be sweet or something that's bad for the child. Whenever we stop to eat, drink something, we are signaling the nervous system it's not an emergency. Obviously, if a tiger is chasing you, you're not going to stop to eat or drink. So you're signaling your body. It's like the whole take a deep breath. You're signaling your body it's not actually an emergency. You wouldn't be taking deep breaths if you were running from the tiger.

(36:58):

Of course, some kids still don't have the brain development to handle big disappointments like you're turning off the screen. So it may be that your child demonstrates that to you over and over again, no matter what you do to prepare, no matter how you try to create safety at the time. So it's perfectly okay to say to your child that you're going to really limit video games. They're not quite ready to do it yet.

(37:23):

But if you are going to let your child have the video game, then you're in the moment that the video game is going off, you're coaching your child with whatever support they need to meet your expectations. So your expectation is turning off the game. You remember how to do this if you've been following Peaceful Parenting. You have an advantage here. You're practiced at calming yourself down. You're practiced at giving yourself compassion, mindfully noticing your tone of voice. You're practiced at connecting with your child even at times when your child doesn't seem to be open to connection. And it's true, they're not going to be open to connection at this moment when they're in the state of threat about losing the video game.

(38:08):

So the advantage you have is when they're just a little bit on that slide to moving into protection mode, you are able to reach out to them. Sometimes you can joke with them, and you can, even though they're not in a state of play, you can reach them by startling them with something funny that will have them respond in a way that relaxes and shifts them back into connection mode. Because remember, play is a connection function. That won't always work. It certainly won't work if they're far gone. But if you've done everything I've described, at that moment when you're turning off the game and it's hard for them to do, if you think of something you can do to get them laughing, and it could be something like using a silly voice. It could be something like pretending you trip and fall on the floor. It could be something like blasting their favorite song as it's time for them to stop what they're doing on the game.

(39:11):

But as I say, some kids, it's just too hard for them to calm themselves down, and you might make a family decision that there are either no video games or they're very limited to once a week or something. And as they're learning to calm themselves afterwards, and they can demonstrate to you that in fact, they're able to regroup when this happens. But all kids will need support when they're turning off a screen, because turning off a screen is just a hard thing for any kid to do.

(39:38):

Okay, so far so good. I understand my kid's really upset about the video game and I need to work with his nervous system. But are you really saying that all misbehavior is about the nervous system getting dysregulated? Maybe sometimes my daughter is just being selfish when she takes that toy away from her little sister. Or maybe when she says something rude to me or demanding to me, she's just being manipulative.

(40:10):

Well, let me ask you something. If you are rude, and all of us have certainly been rude at some time or other, or if you are demanding, and all of us have certainly been demanding at some time or other, is that coming from a place of connection? No. It's coming from a place of protection. When we're demanding, we're protecting something that we want and think we need. We're protecting our right to get that thing, so we're demanding it. When we're rude, usually it's because we feel like somehow someone has taken advantage of us or they've affronted us. So we don't think of ourselves as being rude, we think of ourselves as sticking up for ourselves, right?

(40:56):

So, demanding and rude behavior, whether it's from us or from our children, is always coming from protection mode. And again, when that child grabs something from her little sister and is, quote, "selfish," unquote, think about it, we've all been selfish before. Does selfishness come from a place of connection? No. Connection... When we feel connected, we're emotionally generous. It comes from a place of protection. I'm selfish because I need that thing for me. Protection.

(41:32):

So when your child acts like that, we can label it as manipulative. We can label it as selfish, but what we're really saying is this is a child who is in protection mode at this moment, so they're not acting at their best, and we can help to reestablish safety.

(41:51):

Now, it's true that we think of children as exhibiting childish behavior, which means they're not regulating and doing what we're teaching them to do, which is, for instance, to be generous. But kids are actually naturally generous when they feel like there's plenty to go around. It's when they feel like they're in competition over the toy that you're going to see them being not generous and grabbing that toy for themselves.

(42:23):

So all behavior that is what we might think of as challenging behavior, all of that is protection behavior. Anytime your child is exhibiting a behavior that... Well, just ask yourself, does the behavior my child is exhibiting make me feel more interested in connecting with them at this moment? If the answer is no, then they're pushing connection away. That means they're in protection mode. So when we get into protection mode, just because we're stressed, it isn't even about our child necessarily, we're also pushing connection away. We're pushing our child away rather than offering regulation. So when any human being is in protection mode, we are pushing other people away because we're out to save number one at that moment. Even though it might be a low-grade protection that we're not even really aware of it, we're just feeling sort of stressed out.

(43:26):

That's why it's so important that we understand the research here that's showing us that the most helpful thing we can do is be mindful. Notice our own state of wellbeing as we go through our day. And I've been telling parents for years to set their device so that it bings at them every hour, and just every hour to just notice their state of wellbeing. And if it's not a state of wellbeing, if it's a state of protection, okay, notice what you need to put yourself back in a state of wellbeing. And by wellbeing, I mean a state of connection, a state of relaxing the nervous system so you can engage, so you can learn, so you can play, so your immune system is working, you can digest your food, and you can be responsive to the needs of your child.

(44:20):

Well, it's clear to me that we could go on talking about the neuroscience behind Peaceful Parenting for hours, but we need to wrap up. So if you could share just one other important finding for parents, what would that be?

(44:37):

That's so hard to pick just one study, but I think I would talk about self-regulation. There are thousands of studies, many thousands, that establish that when parents are able to self-regulate, their children learn self-regulation faster, even children who have more challenges. And we've known for a long time that this is true, and we still don't know all of why it's true.

(45:06):

But one thing we've learned is that it actually changes brain development. For instance, there was this one NIH study that just came out that found that children's brains develop differently, specifically when their mothers were able to self-regulate during conflict. They would set up a situation with the child and the mother. It was all mothers in this study. They would give the mother and child a task to do, and they

filmed the whole thing. And they rated whether the parent, whether the mother, was able to stay positive with the child when the child and the mother disagreed. And when the mother was able to stay positive with the child, to self-regulate even during this tense moment where there was some conflict between the parent and child about solving the problem they'd been given to do in the lab, when that happened and the parent was able to self-regulate and stay positive with the child, the children's amygdala, the alarm system of the brain, was smaller. Smaller. The amygdala actually was smaller. And the parts of the brain that are associated with emotional regulation got larger.

(46:21):

So children whose parents can self-regulate, especially during those moments when there's conflict, which is the hardest time, obviously, parents who can do that, raise a child with a brain that is better able to self-regulate. The parts that self-regulate were bigger, literally bigger. And the alarm system was smaller. Which means... I mean, think about it. If there's an alarm blaring at you, "Danger, danger," and that's the cue you're getting, it's going to be pretty hard to calm yourself down. But if the amygdala, the parts that are responsible for that are smaller, less active, they're not in use as often, you're going to be more able to calm yourself down.

(47:05):

Now, obviously we still need the alarm system. If a tiger jumps out of the bushes, we need to be able to save ourselves. But there aren't that many tigers. 99.9% of the time when our protection mode gets triggered, we are not actually in danger. We need to be able to calm ourselves down. So it really helps to have the alarm system be active when it needs to be and easily reined in when it doesn't need to be active.

(47:35):

And what we have found from the bio research on this is that the brain actually changes. There's other research that shows that the vagus nerve, which you've probably heard of the vagus nerve, vagal tone means you have a toned vagus nerve, which just means that you can recover more quickly when you're upset. And again, what we've learned is that when parents are better self-regulated, the child develops better vagal tone, which is they'll get upset about things, but they're more able to calm down more quickly.

(48:10):

Sound familiar? Everything we've been talking about is the same thing that we've been talking about in Peaceful Parenting for many, many years now. But here's the important thing. We now understand some of the underlying dynamics in the brain and nervous system.

(48:29):

So anytime doubt creeps in and you're worried about, "Oh, shouldn't I tell my child they can't speak to me in that rude tone?" Sure, you should tell your child that, which we've always said, but first, calm yourself down. Self-regulation. Second, reconnect with your child before you do anything else. And third, coach your child so they can meet your expectations instead of threatening. So if the kid is rude to you, instead of saying, "Don't you speak to me that way," you stop, you take the deep breath, and you say to your child, "Wow, that tone of voice sure sounded like you're mad at me. If you're mad at me, tell me what you're mad about. I'm right here, and we can work it out."

(49:18):

So, you're being really clear about your expectation, but you're also clear that you're not returning the barb. You're not being nasty to your child in return for their rudeness. You're not threatening them. You're opening the door to an actual conversation, even though you're upholding standards of civility and the way you want to be treated in your home.

(49:42):

Now, we've always said that's what you need to do in Peaceful Parenting. We used lots and lots of different examples for all different situations. But basically it's always that you self-regulate, you connect, and you coach. Now we know why. When that child was rude to you, they were in a state of dysregulation. When you calm yourself, you're radiating calm, so you've created safety. You're speaking in a tone of voice, again, that establishes connection and creates safety. And even while you're setting a limit about this, you're also telling them you're there to help them with whatever problem they're having. And once kids feel understood, they don't have to be in a state of emergency, because they have backup. They have you.

(50:27):

That's beautiful. And of course, parents are not perfect. So for a parent who wants to do what you're describing and retrain their brain, but they want more support, what should they do? How can they find you online? Obviously some people watching the summit have been following you for years, but some people are just introduced to you. So how can they find you and what kind of support can they get?

(50:55):

I'm so glad you asked that. Everyone needs support for their parenting. This is the hardest job anyone can do, and most of us didn't learn in childhood how to manage our emotions. We didn't develop the neural wiring we needed, and we didn't learn

how to be mindful, so we all need support every day to grow as a parent and as a person.

(51:21):

There are a lot of free resources available to you to do this.

Peacefulparenthappykids.com, it's a thousand-page website. There are articles about every age child. And I do send out a newsletter, because you won't remember to go to the website, right? And a thousand articles is overwhelming. So I send out a newsletter every week. If you're signed up for this summit, you should be getting that newsletter. If not, you can sign up at the bottom of any page on peacefulparenthappykids.com.

(51:49):

The newsletter gives you four articles a week, and they cover different... They're always a breadth of subjects, so you'll find something interesting to you. And if there's nothing interesting to you that week, just delete it. Who cares? Another one will come for you next week. So, enjoy those articles. And often in the article at the end of it, you'll click because there'll be another article after that, and you'll find that as you read these articles, something will begin to change and you'll begin to hear my voice in your ear when you're interacting with your child saying, "Oh, take a breath. Oh, he's in protection mode." And you'll find that how you're showing up with your child will begin to change as you give yourself the support of educating yourself.

(52:36):

Now, if that process seems too slow to you, I also offer an online course. It is three months long. You sign up and you can start the day you sign up, you'll get a welcome email with the link to the course, and you begin, and you get one week at a time because it really does take one week to master everything that's in the course. I give you a free copy of my book, Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids, and I take you through it. But you're doing much more than reading the book. There's a lecture that's about an hour long, and I say lecture, but it's really fun, where I use different voices and explain to you what it is, whatever it is that we're working on. Every week, you get that.

(53:18):

You also get five tiny little meditations, four or five minutes long, that you do each week. One a day for five days of the week. And they're designed to retrain your brain for more calm and self-regulation and self-love. So they make a tremendous difference.

(53:39):

There are many more parts to the online course, but it's the Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids online course. And if you're getting the newsletter, you'll see I will often put in a link so that you can register for the course. And in fact, if you are a VIP in the summit, that gives you a discount on the course that you can use. So if you have purchased the VIP for the summit, you can get a discount, it's a pretty big discount too, on the online course.

(54:10):

I have just heard from parents over and over again how much the course has made... It has been transformative in their life. And in not only the way they show up with their child, but their child's behavior as well.

(54:27):

So there's the newsletter. There's the website. There's the online course. There's the book. If you've got more than one child, there's the sibling book. And if you've read the book... You have to read the first book first. But if you've read this book and you're still having a hard time setting limits, or you're still having a hard time knowing how to connect with your child, or you're still having a hard time self-regulating, that's why I wrote this workbook, because those are the things that parents have the hardest time with. And in this workbook, real change happens because I take you through and I just give you exercises that you do, that you will actually, again, retrain your brain. Because you don't have to be a neuroscientist to understand that we need to give ourselves all the support we can get. And part of that support is repeated experiences so that we can learn, if you want to call it learning, or simply rewire our brain so that we can begin to show up as the parents that we want to be with our children.

(55:34):

I want to close by saying that your child is so lucky to have you. Any parent who watched this interview, any parent who registered for this whole summit is someone who is working hard to become a better parent. And that is a gift to your child. You don't have to be perfect. You really don't. Just put one foot in front of the other and increase your ratio of the moments where you show up as the parent you want to be.

(56:04):

And I want to thank you for being that parent to your child. Your child is so lucky. And by changing what we're handing down, generation by generation, we are changing the world by changing the next generation of kids. And as you can see, it brings me to tears every time I think about this big work in which you and I are engaged. And I'm just honored that you've invited me into your life to let me accompany you on this

journey. My last words to you are thank you for being that kind of a parent with your child, and I'm here to support you every step of the way.

(56:55):

This ends our interview with Dr. Laura Markham. Thank you, Dr. Laura Markham. I really appreciate your passion for this work. And I want to thank you for enjoying this interview and this entire summit. Thank you for letting me be part of your life. I'm honored to support you in your parenting journey.