



Stop Controlling Your Kids and Get Out Of Your Own Way

Dr. Shefali

Interviewed by Dr. Laura Markham

Dr Laura Markham ([00:04](#)):

Hi there. I'm Dr. Laura Markham, founder of Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids. And the organizer of this summit, Nurturing Hearts, Nurturing Minds: The Neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting. I'm delighted to introduce you to my guest today, the incomparable Dr. Shefali.

Dr. Shefali is a clinical psychologist and the New York Times bestselling author of six books, including *The Conscious Parent* and one of my favorites, *The Awakened Family*.

Dr. Shefali, I am so happy to be able to talk to you about how parents can work on themselves to be the parents they want to be. And I would love to start by actually reading you this line that just, long ago when I read this, I underline all my books, but that it really struck me. "We, the parent, unconsciously create the 'bad behavior' in our child, and then we punish them for it." Could you tell us about that?

Dr. Shefali ([01:20](#)):

Well, I don't want parents to think that they are the only creator of the bad behavior, so just off the bat, but we are definitely co-creators and active participants in the negative behaviors that we observe in our children, and we need to take responsibility for that. So I don't want parents right off the bat thinking I'm blaming

them. Listen, I'm a mother, and I've made so many mistakes. So we don't want more shame, more blame and more guilt. So having said that, let me say that for example, we buy our children the TV and the phone and the iPad, and then we are in a battle with them to get off the phone and the TV and the iPad. We, for example, may overindulge our children in certain ways and then we upset with them when they are entitled. We may not be consistent in how we lay our boundaries, and then we are upset with how they violate them. We may be too controlling.

(02:27):

This is such a common thing. I see parents really in two ways, mainly, those who have zero boundaries, zero control, and their children are feeling so unsafe and so entitled, or I have parents who are on the other end who are so controlling. They're controlling curfew, and if curfew is 10 minutes late or curfew is two minutes late, or if the child is one hour extra here or there, the parent is punishing the child. So when parents fall on either end of either too lax boundaries or too strict rules and conditions and boundaries, that's how the negative behavior gets created. So any parent listening who is feeling that they are in a loop with their children, the first thing that they need to examine within themselves is how are my boundaries doing?

(03:20):

Are my boundaries too loose, too confused, too inconsistent? Or all my boundaries maybe too rigid? Maybe I have too many rules, too many conditions, no sugar, sleep by 8:00, lights out by 7:45. We're going to read three books every night. Are you of that kind of parent or are you the parent who is so spontaneous, so impulsive that then you create your own kind of hell and madness? So taking ownership of who we are and how we are participating in the decisions of the house allows you as a parent to feel empowered that, "Oh, okay, I can begin to make changes so that I can change my end of the equation."

Dr Laura Markham (04:06):

Beautiful. So we know that over control, as you said, will trigger the child's nervous system reactivity, and dysregulate them and they'll become rebellious. Power struggles start. But you also referred to the loose boundaries. What happens with that?

Dr. Shefali (04:25):

Well, when there are loose boundaries, there are certain things going on in the parent that I believe are worthy of examining. Number one, the parent may just not be attuned that we have to go to bed by 8:00 because we're getting up at 4:00, say, the

next morning for a flight. The parent may not be organized, may be too scattered, or the parent may be genuinely very afraid of creating any sort of conflict because they don't want to encounter any resistance, and conflict scares them.

(05:03):

So the parent needs to examine, "Is this me? Could I be doing this?" And when the parent feels that this could be who they are, part of their emotional profile, it's very important for the parent to understand that this also causes unsafety because the child is living in an unpredictable, unsafe way. So for example, if the child has to get up for an exam or a test or a sports event at 6:00 the next morning, and the parent is not aware of this the night before and allows the child to do whatever they're doing without creating the safeguards, the child is in an unsafe psychological emotional space now because they're going to be overtired and over fatigued. So the parent, in these ways, is causing a big chaotic nervous system reaction and not even realizing that they are.

Dr Laura Markham (05:56):

Yes. So in all of what you're describing, the parent... And as you say, there's no shame here, there's no blame, but the parent actually has the power to influence things without doing anything with their child. They can start with themselves. So when you're describing these kinds of things, there's lots of different factors that could be at play for a given parent. But how would you suggest that a parent begin to look at themselves to do some healing around whatever is going on?

Dr. Shefali (06:31):

Yes, I think... And that's why I'm so excited for your summit, because part of educating parents is teaching them about the child's brain. Parents, I think, don't understand how the brain develops and how undeveloped the brain is for those first 10 years. And the way we know this, you and I, is because we'll hear parents telling children, "Well, I told you two times that you needed to get up on time and you didn't get up on time," but the child is eight years old. Or the parent is talking to the child who's having a big meltdown, and the parent is saying, "Tell me what is bothering you," thinking the child can coherently articulate what is going on.

(07:19):

So what the parents don't understand is that the brain of the child, especially young, young children, they don't have the faculties for rational, logical, preemptive, self-directed, self-governed, emotional regulation or pre-planning. They just don't have those brain parts yet. So getting angry with them is going to be so disconnecting and

disempowering and shame-inducing. Instead, if the parent understood, "Oh, I'm working with a child who genuinely doesn't have those skills, then I can put into place all those buffers. I can set the alarm clock, I can do the reminders, I can control my own emotions, I can allow for grace and leeway because the child is going to forget their backpack once a week for the next 10 years." If you can just be ready for that, then you are so much more connected and attuned, and then you can teach the skills.

(08:20):

I always say, in my book *The Parenting Map*, I thought I had it here, that there're three reasons only why children act out. Number one, their brain is not developed. And that is such a key part of parenting, to understand how the brain is so full of Swiss cheese holes that we need to compensate for, and we need to put in the agenda, and we need to put the reminder, and we need to set the alarm clock, and we need to let them know in advance, and five times in advance. And parents don't want to do the work, and they think they shouldn't have to do the work. Well, but then you're going to clash. It's like expecting a dog, a puppy dog, to be still right. And I don't mean to give that analogy that our children are puppy dogs, but it's understanding puppy dog essence and children essence. So children just don't have the brain.

(09:17):

The second reason children act out is that they haven't lived long enough. So they're not going to realize that when you spend all your pocket money, "Oh, we don't have any more money to spend," they're not making that connection yet. They haven't lived long enough in pain long enough to understand that cause and effect. And the third reason children act out is because of an emotional component that they're shame-based or they're fear-based. So when parents can deeply imbibe this, then they will go and take a child development course, listen to summits like yours, and understand brain development and then realize, "Oh my god, half the things I've been yelling at my 9-year-old for are out of their capacity." And number two, they will really work on the connection piece, and work on their own emotional regulation. Because for the most part, the parent is being hijacked on their lower brain level and they are not in their higher brain.

(10:19):

As a parent, I was shocked to see how much I'm in lower brain and how quickly I can get into lower brain. And it's because I'm not safe inside myself. And I literally have to teach parents that when your teenager is around you, you have to regulate, you have to create safety, because teenagers amp up the volume at another level. And if you're not ready for them, or if you did not have a teenagehood or a childhood, you

will not be able to understand your kids. So the other day I had a mother of a 12-year-old who was appalled that the child was watching porn with a boy. Now, I'm not condoning porn, but I'm also condoning in the parent a more normal reaction, because she was freaking the hell out. "He betrayed my trust and I'm going to take away everything," and she was missing the fact that he's a prepubescent boy who is going to be curious, either at her house or at someone else's house.

(11:24):

So instead of freaking the hell out and creating disconnection, this was an opportunity for her to understand. But she kept saying, "But I wasn't like that when I was a teenager." And I said, "First, it was a different generation. You are a girl, you're a woman, and you are not 12. So you've disconnected from how that could feel like today." So parents have a lot of owning up to do, and awareness to create. Because we are disconnecting from our children, we're shaming them for things that they are really doing out of an innocence and a naivety.

Dr Laura Markham (11:58):

And as you said, you and I are not looking to shame a parent for overreacting. Many parents who are listening to this are so upset thinking that their child at the age of 12 could find porn. It's a parental nightmare, and parents get very triggered by that. But I'm also hearing you loud and clear that the overreaction does not solve the problem. So can you speak more to how parents can notice when they're overreacting, when they're over controlling, when they're bringing the negative energy and the drama into the situation, how can they notice that and be mindful about it? I know you speak a lot about mindfulness, so they can rein that in.

Dr. Shefali (12:48):

Yes. So what I teach in conscious parenting is the first fundamental elemental awareness that every parent needs to have, that they are constantly bringing themselves into the dynamic, and that cannot be discounted at all. What does that mean? Their tone of voice, their energy, their vibe, whatever word you want to put to it, is deeply irrevocably affecting their children's energy and vibe. It is an energetic play. You and I know we've had clients that when they pick up the phone to talk to their ninety-year-old mother, they have an energetic [inaudible 00:13:32].

Dr Laura Markham (13:32):

Yes.

Dr. Shefali (13:34):

So our children, because they have been with us since day one, are constantly alert and absorbent of our energy. Now, what is that energy? Energy is all our childhood conditioning, all our religious upbringing, all our cultural conditioning, our feelings that day, what happened at the office or in our career or on our wing scale, or in our mirror. All of that is part of our vibration, so to speak, that we bring into the dynamic that is deeply impacting our children. So while we can never control our children or our partners, what we can become aware of is all this baggage we bring in the present moment.

(14:20):

Once we're aware that we're bringing baggage, we need to be present in the moment, and that's where mindfulness comes in, and so how it's showing up right now in our tension in our shoulders, in our clenching of the jaw, in our heart rate, in our body, in our tone of voice, how we elevate, I immediately go to a high pitch before I even know it. So immediately being an observer of the self is the key. And the body is telling you, the body is showing you how you are out of sync. And if you're not aware of your body, then the next thing that is going to make you aware is your child's reaction to you. But you see, when our child reacts to us with a reaction, we think it's just them.

Dr Laura Markham (15:10):

Right.

Dr. Shefali (15:11):

Like, "Why are you talking to me so rudely?" So for example, you're driving your car to pick up your child and you're not aware that you're stressed, you're anxious, you're worried about tomorrow, you're planning the dinner, you're running against time, you're not aware. Now your child walks into the car. Now they have had a whole day of stress and anxiety and pressure. They sit in the car in their hoodie and you go, "Oh, how was your day?" So you are disconnected from yourself and you are putting on a face to connect with your child. You think you're connecting. And then the child says, "It was fine." And now you get triggered immediately, "Why are you acting so mean? Why are you so bitchy? Why are you so snappy?" But actually they're just being themselves. They're just being in their mood. But because we were disconnected of all our pressures, we snap, but we just blame them.

(16:11):

Now, if we were aware, say the conscious parenting approach, we were aware and we are like, "Okay, take it easy on your kid. You're stressed out. Don't put it on him. Let

him be in his space. He's allowed to be in his space. You are just going to be here as a welcoming energy." Look at that. So you're preparing yourself when you pick up your kid. Now your kid comes in the car and they go, "I'm fine." You are aware. "Oh, that was triggering, but I'm not going to dump." And then you just reach out and just rub their tie and go, "I know you must be a little tired. Just relax. I'm here." And you just continue on. Look at that difference versus the first one.

(16:52):

So that's why mindfulness of your own conditioning, your own anxiety and your body, that's how you become aware. You tap into your body. "How am I feeling right now? What's going on with me?" But most of us parents are so disconnected, we're walking around as if we're universes of positivity, and it's only our partners and our children who are the unconscious ones. And that is the big disconnect that parents have. Your body is your way to know. So check in every five minutes. Every five minutes, "How am I? What's my emotional state? Where am I? Is anything bothering me?" And learn to resolve those irritations frustrations in the moment so that you can receive your children with an open heart and an open curiosity and spontaneity.

Dr Laura Markham (17:45):

I love the description of reaching out and just touching them and saying, "I'm here. I know you've had a hard day. I'm here," because it's a visceral way to create safety. You were talking about safety earlier, safety for ourselves when you're around your teenager and you're feeling off balance, how to create safety for yourself, and also for our children, imagining that child getting in the car and they meet the parents' chaotic energy and nervous system stress, and they've just had a hard day and now they're more stressed. So that shift where we're able to create safety settles down their nervous system as well as, of course, ours.

Dr. Shefali (18:29):

Right, because what we don't realize is that we are actually looking for our children to regulate us.

Dr Laura Markham (18:35):

Beautiful. Yes. Tell us more about that.

Dr. Shefali (18:38):

So when we are stressed and frustrated and anxious, which we all are, and we are not aware, we are then unconsciously looking for our partner, our children, our friends, to regulate us, but we're not aware. So we are actually putting a demand on

them. So when we're saying, "How are you?" We actually want them to say, "I'm okay and I'm great. How are you?" Now, when they don't give us that, and actually give us the opposite, we snap. So we cannot use our children to regulate us. That is not a burden they can carry. We must take care of our own regulation.

(19:19):

And that means being mindful that the first rule of thumb is becoming aware. If you're not even aware, how are you going to do any of this? You can learn any strategy, but if you don't learn mindfulness and presence and awareness, none of the strategies are going to work. And that's why I teach conscious parenting because it's not a technique, it's a mindset, of, "I better clean up my internal house before I allow others to come in. It's not fair for me to invite others when my house is a bomb site. So I need to clean this up."

(19:57):

And when we do, we less expect our children to regulate us, and then we begin to regulate them. So like you said, just by that touch, or the other day, my daughter, who's 21, texted me and said, "Oh, I have two tests, but I'm going to do very badly on one, and I already know it." Now the ego in us wanted to say, "Well, why did you do that? Why didn't you prepare? And next time you better do it." So I wrote it all out and then I deleted it. So I gave myself room to be the parent, the ego, and then I completely deleted it. And I said, "Be in the moment. Do the best you can. Breathe."

Dr Laura Markham (20:41):

Beautiful.

Dr. Shefali (20:43):

And now two or three days later, I'm saving that lesson, and later I'll bring it up like, "Why did you do that?" Or, "Tell me more." But timing, timing is so important. And sometimes we parents can see our child is stressed, especially when they are screaming, crying. And then Laura, we will do stupid things like, "Let's breathe together," and that's good, but not in this moment. Or, "Tell me more," or, "Why are you upset?" Or, "Go to your room." We make it worse.

Dr. Shefali (21:23):

Because we can't talk... When our child gets unregulated, because we were never helped in childhood, it completely dysregulates us. We go into our ego of, "Why can't my child just listen to me? Why is my child being so bitchy or mean or tantrummy? Why?" We judge, we resist, so that's the ego. But really what's underneath that ego is

like, "I'm a bad parent. You are not happy with me. I can't make you happy." And that is our own five-year-old self that couldn't make mommy happy. That's what's coming up.

(21:58):

So because we are not in touch with that in a child, we go into ego and we scream, we control, we rage or we become ultra calculated and in our head, like, "Tell me more. Tell me what's going on." That's not going to work. Because what's happening in our child is that their little child... They've become a little, little self that is feeling very scared. So their ego is activated to protect them, and they're tantruming, but actually they're very scared. So we are now two very scared human beings. So who is going to be the adult? So we go from fear to ego, and we skip the adult. And that's what I teach in my book *The Parenting Map*, is how do you activate the adult?

(22:42):

And when you can activate the adult for yourself, it'll sound like, "Mommy, you are fine. Your child loves you. You're a good mommy. She needs help. Her brain needs help. Her nervous system needs help. Can you be the help?" And when you look at it like that, "Oh, okay, I can be a nervous system helper," versus, "My child doesn't like me," or, "My child is unhappy." Those things create threat.

(23:08):

So if I can just go, "Okay, her brain needs some help. She doesn't have the language. Let me just create safety." Then you recruit your helper, your adult self helper, and you go and help this person just like you would help a puppy dog or a friend or a sick person. So if you can look at it like that, then you can create that space and go, "I'm a helper. I'm a nervous system helper. Let me go help this person." And the way to do that first is to be so calm and go to your child's level and go, "Come, come, come, come, come." That's it. You just have to go, "You're very sad. Mommy made you angry." It's the tone. It's not even the words.

Dr Laura Markham (23:49):

Right.

Dr. Shefali (23:49):

"Yes, you are safe. You're safe. Come, come, come, come. I know mommy's so mean sometimes. I know, I know, I know." It's just the words. It's just the tone, right? It's just the energy. It's not the actual content. It's just, "I know. I understand. You are good. You are good, you're fine. You're communicating through your energy that I understand you. You are safe. I'm going to help you." And there's no more fighting. But

the other one, "Go to your room, sit on the timeout stool." That is telling the child that they have to sit with all these big feelings, and they're feeling so scared, now they have to be alone. Or worse still, they're going to get spanked. That is nervous system overload. It's actually overload to the point of shutting it down. Because [inaudible 00:24:44].

(24:46):

I remember telling a parent of a two-year-old that they were not allowed to timeout or spank, and the parent was appalled, like, "Really?" I said, "Oh my God, a two-year-old's brain is so fragile. You're smashing it." I try to use every analogy. You're collapsing it. We are very big, scary people for our children, and I don't think we realize how scary we are.

Dr Laura Markham (25:10):

Well, because we spend a lot of time getting triggered ourselves in being in our small self. So I love your description of how we can essentially reparent ourselves. It sounds like in *The Parenting Map*, you are talking about that and guiding parents on how to access that part of themselves and how to reparent themselves so they can show up as the adult. And they don't have to resort to these control strategies that are so destructive to children, spankings or timeouts or just control in general, the yelling, the tantrums in which parents find themselves, not because they're bad people, but because they're so... They're triggered themselves and they don't know how to regroup.

Dr. Shefali (25:55):

I only learned this because I made so many mistakes. When I look back when my daughter was three and I was glowering at her and overpowering her and finger wagging her, I wish I could take back those times of terror that I created in her. But I've learned to have compassion for myself and for what I did and allow myself to grow. So any parent listening to this going, "Oh my God. Just yesterday I screamed at my kid, and my kid is like... Her brain has collapsed, Dr. Shefali said." I want you to understand that the best of us have done this for years, but we've grown. So this is your opportunity to go, "You know what? I'm going to take more courses. I'm going to read Laura's books, Dr. Shefali's books, and I'm going to grow."

(26:41):

So don't get stuck in guilt and shame because that is your old self. But your new self can say, "Okay, they've all done this." I want every parent to know that I have messed up so many times, I cannot even count. I must have messed up last month because

my daughter was angry with me as well. So the point is not not to mess up, because you will mess up. The point is to keep evolving and creating safety. Ultimately, it's to create safety. So if you didn't do it in the moment, let's create safety in the aftermath, in the post-war, and grow, and go to our children and go, "Mom's fucked up. I'm so sorry. Have you met your grandma?" You can blame the grandma. But then you can create safety. "It's not you, it's me. I'm working on it. Look, I bought this book. I'm doing the work. Please know it is not you." Right? That is also very helpful for child to realize that it's not me.

Dr Laura Markham ([27:39](#)):

Yes. Because kids assume it's them. Unless we are explicit about it, kids assume it's them.

Dr. Shefali ([27:46](#)):

Yes. Yes. And owning that humility.

Dr Laura Markham ([27:51](#)):

Yeah. I love that you brought up self-compassion. I have found, as I'm sure you have found, that when parents lose it with their kids, that recovery can be very hard. And none of us do well from a place where we're shaming ourselves or humiliating ourselves or feeling so regretful. And I have just seen that self-compassion is the essential tool for parents to be able to give themselves that love and care and remind themselves they're not alone in doing this, everyone, every parent has been in that situation.

Dr. Shefali ([28:29](#)):

Yes, so I've come to tell parents and myself that one of the most empowering sentences you can begin to say to yourself and your children is, "Yes, I am limited, and I'm working on it." Instead of pretending we're not limited. Then you're all defensive. No, you are limited. You're going to lose your shit. You're going to make mistakes. You're going to be thoughtless. You're going to forget their birthday maybe, or some big event. So just go, "Yes, I am terribly flawed. I'm working on it, but I don't mean to ignore you. I don't mean it. I'm trying."

([29:06](#)):

Your children need to know that y'all are trying. How can your children expect you to be perfect? And for a long time, I was stuck in this idea that I need to be perfect. And that every time I wasn't perfect, I got angry with her. So it's a very dangerous trap when you want to be a perfect parent. Let it go. Burn it, bury it, kill it. The more I

accept, "Yeah. Sorry, that's me. I messed up." Actually, your children will be easier on you and more relaxed, and they will realize that they don't need to be perfect.

Dr Laura Markham ([29:42](#)):

Yes. So it's a gift to them. That is tremendous.

Dr. Shefali ([29:45](#)):

Yes.

Dr Laura Markham ([29:46](#)):

And I want to wrap up with a question about healing intergenerationally, because we can all look and say, "Look at grandma," who did her best at that moment, and who loved us as well as she could. But we are working on ourselves, and we weren't perfect. So our kids have who they are, plus whatever we didn't work out. They're not perfect either, of course, because we're all human. But our relationships over time do change when we show up in a different way. So creating emotional safety, working on ourselves, what message of hope can we give parents about what that creates for their grandchildren?

Dr. Shefali ([30:30](#)):

Yeah. It's such a wonderful embodiment of mindfulness when you realize that the patterns can stop with you. For the biggest part, not completely. It's such a powerful, empowering message that you can give yourself that, you know what? The patterns can stop right now. Even if I'm 65 or 82, it's time to stop now. And parents often feel like it's too late and they've done too much damage. It's never too late to create a new now.

([31:08](#)):

You may not be able to clean up the past or even what's created in your child already, but it's time to start a new now. So especially parents of addicts or children with chronic anxiety that they feel, "Oh my God, if only I'd known this before," that guilt and shame is very understandable, and I will not even tell you not to have it, but to have compassion for yourself more and more. So even if you're guilty, learn to let it be a part of your psyche, not all of your psyche, and create a new now, and create a new moment now. And it's never too late to be the pattern disruptor in your family legacy.

Dr Laura Markham ([31:51](#)):

Beautiful. Thank you. What a beautiful message.

Dr. Shefali (31:55):

Oh, thank you, Laura.

Dr Laura Markham (31:56):

We need to wrap up, but how can people find you?

Dr. Shefali (32:00):

So the best way people can find me is on Instagram or my website, DrShefali.com. I have so many courses, but the most valuable gift I've given to the universe, I think, besides my books, is I have a Conscious Coaching Parenting and Life Institute where I certify coaches to do the work I do. So anyone listening who wants to learn to become a conscious parenting and life coach like me, they can join my institute. It's twice a year, and Laura, it's become such a huge movement. I have over 1300 coaches all graduated around the world. So every cohort, we have 100, 120 doing this work and spreading it globally. So anyone listening who wants to do this as a career, they can explore my institute. But thank you for having me. Thank you for all the work you do. You're such a pioneer in your own way, and we all look up to you. So thank you.

Dr Laura Markham (32:58):

Thank you. It was such a pleasure to talk to you today, and I'm honored to be doing this work with you. Thank you. Bye-Bye.

Dr. Shefali (33:07):

Bye, Laura.