



Wired for Connection: How Attachment Shapes Your Child's Brain and Nervous System

Eli Harwood

Interviewed by Dr. Laura Markham

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

This summit is brought to you with love by Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids. Welcome. 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. My guest today is Eli Harwood, a licensed therapist and bestselling author of the book, *Securely Attached and Raising Securely Attached Kids*. We're talking today about how attachment shapes children's brains and nervous systems and how you can raise a securely attached child. So I am here today with Eli Harwood. Eli, I have to start with, why are you called the attachment nerd?

Eli Harwood ([00:49](#)):

Well, I named myself that. I mean, I have been practicing for almost 18 years, and for me, in my journey of being a therapist, the single most influential piece of information for me has been the research on attachment because at the end of the day, how we think, how we relate, how we feel is so deeply intertwined to how we experienced relationships, especially growing up. And so the attachment research is where I find the most helpful paths to healing and I think the most accessible ways of looking at ourselves and our processes and our patterns.

([01:29](#)):

So when I started talking on the internet, I started running my mouth on the internet a couple years ago, I was like, "How do I want to address what it is I'm doing?" I never want to come across someone who knows better than other people. That's also an important thing for me. And so I loved the term nerd because I feel like it shows you this is something I know some things about, I'm very passionate about it, but the goal is not that I'm the expert and you're the learner, it's we're all learning this together. So that's where attachment nerd came from.

Dr. Laura Markham ([01:57](#)):

I love it. So tell us what attachment is.

Eli Harwood ([02:02](#)):

So attachment is a very complex human system, and it's an internal system. So it's a drive that we all have to form close relationships, and it's also a biological system. So human babies are born completely helpless. There is no child that ever crawled out of a uterus and was like, "I think I got this. I'm just going to go do my own thing in the woods." So this attachment dynamic where we have caregivers who we remain close to and we seek proximity to and who also seek proximity to us, that helps keep us alive, it helps our brains and our nervous systems develop. And in the long term throughout our life, Sue Johnson says, "From cradle to grave, it helps us to be emotionally and physically and socially healthy." Human beings are at our best when we have healthy close relationships.

Dr. Laura Markham ([02:52](#)):

Wonderful. So we know that parents get very nervous about the idea of attachment because there are classifications that the researchers came up with a long time ago, strange situation, which are actually amazing, that we can actually look at how a child responds to this protocol in the lab, and we can draw conclusions about how that child's been parented. And if the parenting changes, everything will change. But if it doesn't change, that child will grow up to have a certain relationship with their feelings, a certain relationship with other people. So tell us about that. What are these classifications? And then we'll get into what parents can do about it now to empower themselves.

Eli Harwood ([03:38](#)):

Yes. Well, so what the researchers were doing is they were trying to figure out what is the nature of the relationship between the parent and the child, and how does that impact the child's development long term? And through that process, they

discovered, okay, we have these two coins, relationships that we would say are secure and relationships that we would say are insecure. And then within that insecure category, there's three coins. And so these are our disorganized relationship dynamics, our avoidant relationship dynamics and our resistant. There's also lots of names, so no one needs to memorize this. Here's what you need to know. What you need to know is there is a clear evidence in the research that we as parents can cultivate secure dynamics with our kids by learning some very particular skill sets, which you write about in your books, I write about it in my book. Lots of people have written about it in lots of different books. Thank goodness. The books are growing. It makes my heart so happy. This information's getting out there.

(04:43):

And really what we're looking at is how does a parent think about relational needs, think about emotional needs? We call those that internal model. What is it that the parent understands about relationships, and how does that then drive the parent's behavior and their level of warmth, their level of emotional attunement, and their level of confidence in themselves, which we would call groundedness or calmness? And when a caregiver can learn those three-ish skills, we could talk about this in a lot of different ways, but we'll make it simple of learning how to be confident in ourselves, how to be emotionally attuned, so accurately read our children's emotions and how to be consistently responsive to our children, especially in emotionally tender moments. When we can do that, what happens is our kids learn to rely on us. Isn't that amazing? And not become dependent, that's different. They learn to become interdependent, and that is the life skill that will have great correlation with whether or not they feel resilient as they continue on in their journey beyond our arms.

Dr. Laura Markham (05:57):

So attachment where the child can trust that the parent will be attuned and responsive is a secure attachment, and that creates the child's resilience.

Eli Harwood (06:10):

Yes.

Dr. Laura Markham (06:11):

So what do we think is going on in the child's brain and nervous system? Here's this new baby in the world, and the parent comes with all of their stuff. How does that play out in the baby's experience because the nervous system is just taking shape, right?

Eli Harwood (06:28):

Yes. Well, one of the things we know is that babies are born with almost a fully physically formed limbic system. It's not fully formed in terms of it's still learning, the brain is still learning things, but it's structurally there and a very, very structurally underdeveloped prefrontal cortex. And for those of you who aren't familiar with brain nerdiness, what that means is that we are given babies in a feeling form and not in a thinking form. So they rely on us to be that external thinking state, right? A baby can't go, "Oh, I'm uncomfortable because I pooped." That's the parent's job. The parent has to use their senses and go, "Oh, you have a poopy diaper. That's why you're crying." or, "You haven't eaten in a little while, or maybe you're cold or you're too hot." So the parent is doing the thinking for the child.

(07:23):

And when a parent is able to do that with effectiveness, so if a parent has an effective model of a child's needs, then they can respond with care and compassion, and they can give them what they need, then the child feels calm because they experience the signals for distress, but then they experience connection right next to that. And so the child's brain brilliantly will put more resources towards this thickening of the thinking brain. And I'm over exaggerating this. Every neuroscientist listening is like, "Well, it's not just a thinking brain and a feeling brain," but for the parenting purposes, that's how we're going to view it. But the part of the brain that does more complex understanding, gives empathy, helps us regulate, helps us make meaning out of things, that brain is going to get more resources if a caregiver is highly responsive and effective at caregiving because the child can sense, "My needs are met, I am safe, I am heard, I cry, and someone comes."

(08:32):

Whereas children who don't have that experience, maybe their caregiver mistakenly believes that babies spoil if we respond to them too much, well then a child's brain learns people aren't going to come. You've got to handle this on your own. It's not a cognitive. I'm making this sound more cognitive than it is, but then the child has to figure out how to cope. And then the brain says, "Let's send more resources to the amygdala," the reactivity center of the brain. And if that gets flooded and overloaded, then the brain might say, "Let's actually just check out. Let's just shut down." And then it's going to send less activity to the hippocampus. We're going to have less cell density there. So this relational dance between parent and child is shaping whether or not a child feels safe and therefore what the child's brain is doing in terms of how it allocates resources for development.

Dr. Laura Markham (09:31):

So parents who are hearing this are a little bit nervous at this moment. No matter how old their child is, they're thinking, "Oh, my goodness, when he was a baby and I couldn't calm him down, and I just put him in the crib and went and screamed outside, and then I came back and picked him up, did I damage him for life?" So can we talk about repeated experiences? What creates the working model of the child? The unconscious belief system, some people would say, but in attachment, we call it a working model, right?

Eli Harwood (09:59):

Yes, yes. It's a pattern. So if you made a quilt, it's so funny, I obviously don't quilt. I was knitting as I did that. If you made a knitted blanket or a quilt, and most of the fabric or most of the yarn you used was blue, but there were occasional periods of red or yellow or orange, but we held up the quilt and overall it was predominantly blue thread. And I said to you, "What color is this quilt?" You would say blue, right? Maybe with some sprinklings of other colors, but ultimately it would appear to you as a blue quilt. And that's what happens for children in their relationships to us. There is absolutely room for us to have our moments to not show up, to be in a funky place, to be overwhelmed. The key is, do we come back to that blue thread?

(10:54):

Do we recognize I started using the orange thread, I started using the yellow thread and come back to the blue thread? And can we have compassion for ourselves in those moments in recognizing that there is no perfect parenting. That does not exist. I'm sure you're very familiar with Ed Tronick's work, and I know there's another study, but I tell parents the idea is to be attuned and responsive and connected between 30% and 50% of the time. And if you are doing that well, you got an A in parenting and that we're graded on a curve. No one's doing this a hundred percent of the time because there are dishwashers to be emptied. There's a need to have a job, to be able to make money, to make income to feed our families. And there are just days when you just need to lock yourself in the bathroom while your child pounds on the door on the other side because you're over-simulated and you're exhausted and you're just trying to figure out how to respond.

(11:53):

All of that is included in a secure experience. And so everyone can just go like this. You're the type of parent that is on Dr. Laura Markham's Summit right now trying to learn how to give your kids the best possible. They're probably getting that from you.

Dr. Laura Markham ([12:10](#)):

Thank you. So these responses of the child to the parent, the child sometimes feels in a perfect world, "You know, sometimes my parents don't show up right away, and I cry louder, and I assert myself. And guess what? They come." And within reason, that's great because the child learns to stand up for themselves, and they're getting that someone will be responsive to their needs. The child who has to cry loud all the time might end up, it's not so good. As you said, the amygdala gets overdeveloped to look for threat all the time. So these attachment styles that we develop in babyhood, really, I mean, we can measure them by the time you're 15 months old, so really babyhood. So these attachments also are designed to protect us as little ones, and then we carry them through life unless there's a change in our circumstance. So how did they affect our ability to emotionally regulate and our stress response?

Eli Harwood ([13:14](#)):

Well, our relationship to our feelings is developed socially. So we all have all the feelings. There's no model of human being that is born without the feelings. The feelings are part of our adaptive evolutionary survival. So we have this instinct to express sadness when we feel loss, to express anger when we feel violated, to clench up and panic when we're in danger or we don't feel right. So all of these emotions are within all of us, but our caregivers cultivate meaning with us about our emotions. And so there's potentially layers of other emotions that come with our emotions. So if I feel sad and someone says, "You're fine, don't be such a wimp," now there's a layer of shame on top of my sadness, and now I have a more complex process to regulate that sadness than if I'm sad and I have a caregiver who can say, "Oh, you're sad. Come here and hold me and be present with me and allow the sad wave to go up and to go down." And so regulation is so impacted by our caregiving because we're sending meaning, but we're also offering presence.

([14:34](#)):

And what I like to say is pain is painful no matter what, but it is a lot more possible to endure it when we don't feel alone in it. And so it's not our job as caregivers to prevent our children from feeling pain or to make sure that they are happy all the time. That's not regulating our children, that's creating regulations for our children. You shall feel this. You shall feel that. We're regulating our children when we are present with what they feel, and we offer empathy and support and understanding and eventually guidance when they calm down. We can help them figure out what happened, what they can do different. But that experience of, "I can have support when I feel upset," helps a child feel more comfortable tolerating their emotions and therefore regulating as they grow.

Dr. Laura Markham ([15:22](#)):

Beautiful. So when children experience a consistent, loving, responsive, attuned attachment versus neglect or inconsistent attachment, what do we think is happening in their nervous system and brain long term? What can we expect from that child at age eight or age 18?

Eli Harwood ([15:47](#)):

Well, one thing I want to mention is that we have an interplay always between our temperament and our environment. So it really does depend on the child. So you can have a child who is very calm natured in a chaotic environment and so their coping mechanism is more to shut down versus a child who maybe has more of a spicy temperament and they're in that same chaotic environment, and their response is to become eruptive, right? So there's no clear way to say if this, then exactly this, except what we do have data on is how a child will handle their tender moments. So if a child's in an environment that is fundamentally unable to soothe them, so that might be in an environment that's dismissive, completely dismissive, we don't do feelings here, that's indulgent, stop that right now. Or it might be an environment that's actually intrusive. Are you okay? Are you okay now? Are you sure? Are you sure? Did I do something? Are you mad at mommy? What happened there? Right?

([16:53](#)):

Both of those, even though those are very different approaches to emotions, neither one of those offers a child a refuge when they are upset. So what a child will do, very young, like you said, 15 months, we say 12 to 18 months in the strange situation research is they will stop reaching for others and stop expressing their feelings externally because they've learned if I share this information either by crying or by saying something or by trying to reach for someone, I will actually feel worse afterwards. I'll feel misunderstood, I'll feel intruded upon. And so instead, I'm going to develop an avoidance strategy, which means when emotions come into the room that are overwhelming to me or other people, I'm going to find a way to leave the room either literally or figuratively because I don't want to burden anyone with what's going on inside of me.

([17:48](#)):

And so that child at eight or nine might actually look very high functioning. In fact, they often get a lot of praise because they aren't asking for anything from anyone. They don't cry when sad things happen. They look independent. But what they are is actually isolated. And if that continues throughout their life, then they usually become dependent on things like alcohol or other addictions like eating disorders,

things that help them numb because that's their primary coping skill. A child who is in an environment that is unpredictable in terms of how often they get warmth and responsiveness, so let's say that a caregiver is able to sometimes be there, sometimes show up, but then struggles with maybe alcoholism or a serious mood disorder, that child will struggle to soothe. So they will be very good at reaching and clinging and being clingy and being preoccupied with the people in their life, but when they get close contact, they don't feel better.

(18:54):

And so they learned, I call it like the badger approach, "Do you love me? Do you love me now? Do you still love me now? Do you still love me? I think you only said that because I asked you to." Badgering for more reassurance, but none of the reassurance lands. So there's a high state of external expression of anxiety, and that if it doesn't go unchecked, it stays throughout the lifetime of that person. And then if someone grows up with parents who are scary, these are our little bugs with disorganized experiences, they usually have to resort to what I would call a primal response to distress. So as soon as distress comes up in their body or in the room, they go into that fight, flight, freeze, faint or fawn response. And so they're going to struggle in close relationships because closeness actually feels dangerous. And so there's a push pull, a constant push pull for them in relationships, not wanting to be abandoned, but also not wanting to be close and being very stuck in that process.

Dr. Laura Markham (19:58):

I want to get into what parents can do to make things better. And maybe I want to start with a brief, just going back to the word confident, because when you started you said, "If parents are confident, responsive and attuned," well confident, what are they confident about? But you just used an example that was so great that I want to highlight it. You said a parent who is, you used the word intrusive, which is what we use in attachment, intrusive. Are you okay now? Are you okay? Now, a lot of parents think that that's attuned. They're trying to make sure their kid's really okay. But if the people listening consider how it feels, you did such a great job of that feeling, it almost felt like an attack on the person listening, right?

(20:56):

So because it's so intense of like, "Am I okay now? Am I okay?" No, but I think what you just did was you modeled for us how parents can make it the child's problem. They make it so the child is not safe. They think they're being responsive, but in fact there's no safety there because of the intrusiveness.

Eli Harwood (21:20):

I love this. So that intrusiveness is a result of unresolved wounds in that parents' experience, right?

Dr. Laura Markham ([21:26](#)):

Of course.

Eli Harwood ([21:27](#)):

I didn't feel like anyone was looking after me. I felt neglected. And so my child is not going to feel that. I'm going to constantly hypervigilantly monitor what my child is feeling in hopes that they feel what I didn't feel, but it's actually not the right replacement. So the right replacement is, I care about what you feel, and I can handle what you feel. I am both separate and connected. And that's that skill set. I also like to use the word soft and sturdy. So when you can sense that maybe your child's a little off, you can say, "You okay kid?" And they might say, "I'm fine." And you're like, "Clearly you're not fine." But rather than taking on that energy, you're reading what they're offering you. It sounds like you're not wanting to talk about feelings right now, right?

([22:27](#)):

You're reading where they are. They're like, "No, I don't." That's fine, that's fine. If something comes up later, let me know. And then you are calming your own body, and what you're confident in is that you are going to show up for your kids and that they are going to go through messy emotional things, and that won't mean they were abandoned by you or you failed. It means they're human. And so the confidence is not I'm always going to be able to figure this out or I'm always going to be able to get my kid to feel good. The confidence is I love my kid, and I'm going to continue to be there for them even when it's messy, even when it's unclear what they need, and at some point we'll figure it out.

([23:17](#)):

And sometimes that's 20 minutes later. Sometimes that's months later. There are seasons of parenting where you're going, "Huh, I think I know what this is. I'm not sure." But the key is that you come with a calm-ish nervous system that as much as you can you are letting your children borrow your body's sense of trust in the relationship between you two.

Dr. Laura Markham ([23:47](#)):

What a beautiful way to say it. Your body, your nervous system has that groundedness, that confidence, that trust, and kids can borrow that. And you started

by saying that there are specific things that parents can learn to do. That sounds like one of them. Tell us about those specific things.

Eli Harwood ([24:06](#)):

Okay, I'm going to make this very sound bitey and easy because I know we're tired. We all are. Our brains are so overstimulated. The first thing I want all of you doing is very easy. When your children come into the room, I want you to viscerally obviously light up. Now, you want to do this authentically to who you are. So I know that not all of us are going to do this in dramatic ways, but I like to think of it as the golden retriever approach. So when we come home to our dogs, we know they're glad to see us because they wag their tail, they shake their little bodies, they slobber all over themselves, and they nuzzle into us. So what's that equivalent for you so that your kids know they are wanted in the room? There's so much power in knowing that someone finds us delightful.

([24:54](#)):

So we're lighting up in some way, shape, or form. And obviously different kids are different also. So you're going to think through that. If you have a teenager who's very sensitive and doesn't like a show, you're not going to wag and wave and do this at their high school event. They're going to turn beet red. But you might just take a little look, and when you get their eyes, they could see that I feel glee in my body that I get to see you and be near you and be around you. That's powerful. And then the second thing we're going to do is we're going to do our best to show up for these two things, the tender moments. So when our kids are crying, when they're having anxiety, when they're overwhelmed, we're going to do our best to bring our body, our present, our heart and mind to them and just be with them.

([25:43](#)):

We're not going to try and fix it. We're going to be with them. You're going through this. This feels so hard. I see you. I see how hard this is. Because when people are with us and they bear witness to what we feel, it allows us to feel less alone and therefore to begin to figure out how to problem solve our problems. And then we're also going to show up for their triumphant moments. There is power in being there for that little league game. There is power in being there for that graduation or honestly, when our kids are even little it's the ladybug they found in the backyard, "Mama, mama." It's putting down the dish that you're washing, I don't know why I'm obsessed with dishwashing in this episode, but the dish that you're washing and walking out and going, "Oh, a ladybug." And being there in those triumphant moments because when we feel like people are there for us in our pain and our joy, there is something that

builds inside of us that allows us to trust our bodies and to pursue the places of desire that come up in our lives. That's what we want for our kids.

(26:49):

Then we're going to be parents who listen up. We're going to listen to our children. We're going to hear what they have to say. That doesn't mean we're letting our kids make the parenting decisions, but we want to make sure that they know they have a voice with us, not just about things they're thinking about and feeling, but also their relationship to us. Our kids can give us great feedback. My son on a regular basis will let me know when I'm living in stress land. He'll be like, "Oh, you're being so harsh mom." And that's always my cue. I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I am giving too much of what I have away out into the world and not to him and not to them, and this is my cue to put some more boundaries down so that I have what I need to be present and calm and patient." So be a parent who listens up because we also want our kids to trust us to come with us later when life gets tricky and complex. We want to be that phone call where they say, "I'm in trouble. Something's complicated. I need your help." So we want to be the type of parents that they trust will hear them.

(27:48):

And then last of all, we want to be skilled at making up when we mess up because there's nothing that I do as much daily as I do messing up. It's just a part of it. So we want to be people who can say to our kids, "Hey, I'm so sorry I was being harsh. I overreacted to that." Or, "I under reacted to this," or "You're right. Oh, my gosh, take this phone out of my hand, throw it across the room. I was not paying attention." Our kids can sense, one, that we can own our mistakes without crumbling in shame or getting defensive, and they deserve relationships with people who are able to acknowledge when they've been less than awesome.

Dr. Laura Markham (28:36):

And also your modeling helps them become that person. That's the only way they learn. It is from living it.

Eli Harwood (28:42):

So you're going to light up, show up, listen up and make up. If you can do those four things 30% to 50% of the time, you're going to be fine.

Dr. Laura Markham (28:53):

I love the light up ladybug moments because when we think of attachment, often we're thinking of little ones, and we're thinking of the Dan Siegel safe, scene, soothed,

secure, and those are all obviously really important, but those are more for the distress moments of responsiveness. But I love that you're also talking about the moments of desire, of passion, following your passion of excitement about life, and we're affirming those as well. That's beautiful.

Eli Harwood (29:24):

Which I think that's actually easier for most people. And so I think that's important to be some days you aren't going to know what to do because maybe you have a very, very highly sensitive child who when they feel their feelings, your trauma comes up, you're overwhelmed. That's going to be something you need to work on. But maybe it'll take more time. But in the meantime, in those simple moments, "Mom, try this pancake I made." And you're like, "Okay. Oh, yum." There's another term in the research that I like of serve and respond. So our kids are going to make these bids for connection. They're going to serve us that ball. And, again, we're not going to be able to do it. I mean, I have three kids. I'm being hit by balls all day long 24/7, but as much as I can, I'm turning to return that search. "Oh, you made a pancake. I love that ladybug. Wait, what are you doing on Minecraft? What's a creeper? How does that work?" You're investing in this relationship where your kids can sense that they can rely on you. That's the goal.

Dr. Laura Markham (30:28):

So to go back to repair for a minute because I know a lot of people get stuck there. You talked about, you mentioned Ed Tronick earlier, the idea that we are not attuned a lot of the time. We don't need to be attuned all the time. We want to increase our ratio. So we do it by repairing, by noticing, "Oh, the child is now distressed. Oops, get back into attunement." So when you have a situation with your child where you've lost it and you've yelled at them, let's say, something that you need to do repair, I love your scripts for parents that you give them the words. Tell us what should the parents say to the child at that point? Everything is settled now. It's not in the middle of the interaction. It's later.

Eli Harwood (31:15):

Yeah, I think you can keep it in simple language for kids, and you don't need to give a whole long explanation of everything. Your kid doesn't need to hold all of your stuff that's within that moment. So it's just simply, "Hey, I wish I hadn't reacted so big. My reaction was really big. I think I might've even come across a little scary. Did you feel scared when I said [inaudible 00:31:38]? Did that feel scary to you? I'm really sorry. You did not deserve to be talked to like that. I just was really feeling overwhelmed."

And this is Dan Siegel's work. I flipped my lid. I was in my downstairs brain versus my upstairs brain.

(31:57):

And it's funny, I tend to talk in third person with smaller children. I'm trying to analyze this, but I will say something like, "Mommy was really upset, and I wasn't very gentle." And my kids would be like, "No, you weren't very gentle." And I'm like, "I know. Can I try again? Can I have a do over?" I love giving do overs for kids because I want my kids to have do overs. This is how we learn this stuff. We get repetition and practice. If you have an older child, they're a teenager and they're an adult child, I mean, you can use their words. What have they told you about what they didn't like about what you did? You come back and you're like, "You felt like I was harsh. You felt like I dismissed you. I really wish I had done that better."

Dr. Laura Markham (32:44):

And this brings us to the parent who says, "Yeah," but then the kid says, "But mom, you always do this," or "You apologize all the time, but you don't change." And this is where we need to talk about supporting people to do their own healing from their own relational traumas when they were young, when they didn't have a secure attachment, when they didn't feel safe. So everything is a threat to them. So they're in this cycle of responding harshly or whatever because they think there's a threat. So what do we do? I know you work with parents with relational trauma. What should that parent, what's the first step for them? What is the healing process going to look like for them?

Eli Harwood (33:25):

I think this is such a fabulous question because the average parent does have stuff to work on.

Dr. Laura Markham (33:32):

We all grow up as children. Yeah.

Eli Harwood (33:36):

Yes, exactly. The things that are wounded in your relationship with your child are relational wounds. So they happened in the context of your attachment experiences, which were probably insecure, right? If you're struggling at that level, you're probably dealing with some unresolved insecurity. The primary way that's going to get better is in a caring relationship. So find people in your life, that might be a therapist, that might be a community group, mentors, a partner, people in your life who can offer

you the kind of compassion you need to become more full of compassion so that you can offer that to your children. I think a lot of people think, "I need to stop being bad. I'm a bad parent," and so they go into shame and self contempt, and that actually will just drive you further into whatever insecure pattern you're in because you're be depleted.

(34:32):

So it's about restoring your heart. Where can you restore your heart to feel worthy, to feel supported if you have no one in your life? I wrote a guided journal for this. It's called Securely Attached, and it just walks you through questions about your childhood and your adult relationships and helps you recognize where did I learn these patterns that I've developed, and how can I learn more secure patterns? It's more focused on adult to adult relationships because it's not our children's job to meet our attachment wounds. We need to find other grownups in our life who can do that. And then that's what allows us to then buffer down to our kids. So, yeah, that's a resource for people.

Dr. Laura Markham (35:14):

For parents who are struggling with their own, it could be relational trauma from the past, it could come up just as anxiety or stress, how can they build a secure attachment with their child? We've got our five things. We've got the light up, listen up. What do you call your repair? It's called-

Eli Harwood (35:40):

Makeup when you mess up.

Dr. Laura Markham (35:41):

Yeah, makeup. So if parents can make the choice to do those things, do you see that that fake it till you make it works in terms of giving the children a different experience even while the parent is still working on themselves?

Eli Harwood (35:58):

Yeah. I think what's beautiful about the attachment system is it's flexible. And so if your intention is to give your children a more secure experience with you and your capacity or your ability at the beginning of that intention is as simple as I can at least light up when you come in the room, and I can learn to start saying sorry, but I'm still working on these other two things. I still don't know how to listen when things get emotional, I don't know how to show up. That will still make a difference in building trust. We don't need to be perfect. And I like to say generational trauma is

transmitted usually over multiple generations. So it's also usually healed over multiple generations. Do your best with what you have, with what you can offer. Give your kids as much security as is possible for you, and don't hold yourself to this perfectionistic idea that you're going to learn all of these things.

(36:54):

If you came from a heinously traumatic childhood, you're probably not going to be able to do all of this in one fell swoop. It's going to take time, but there will be power for your children in watching you transform. They will notice, they will feel that. And like anything else, it takes practice. So you are going to be faking it at the beginning. The first time we get on a bike, is it faking it? We don't know what we're doing yet, but we're getting our feet to those pedals and we're pushing. I don't know if it's faking it, it's just the first tries.

Dr. Laura Markham (37:25):

Right. And I think you're right. Parents will say to me, "Well, I don't feel that. Is it fake it till you make it?" And I think you're right. There's nothing faking about it because in fact, the limbic system is using the eye contact, the physical touch, the nonverbal communication of safety. It's getting to your kid. And so they are feeling that feeling. So that's what I love about your you can do these five specific things because then regardless of what you came into life with and what you're still working on, you are-

Eli Harwood (38:00):

That's going to make a difference.

Dr. Laura Markham (38:04):

Yes. And I want to also say classifications in a way. We know you can have an insecure attachment as a child and you can work on it and you can have an earned secure attachment as an adult. So it doesn't mean anything is said, right?

Eli Harwood (38:24):

I find that as a culture we really love, are you this type or that type or this type or that type or this? And in the attachment arena, the only reason it's important to have an idea about your patterns is to really recognize are they secure or insecure? And what do I need to do in order to go from this pattern I have into a more secure pattern? But it's not about going, "I am this," or "My partner is that." It's about going, "What else do I need to learn? What else do we need to learn? Where are we going?" And I think that's part of why my first book and my second book *Raising Securely Attached Kids*, I'm focusing on the secure piece because that's our goal. That's where we're going.

(39:08):

So I don't want people to reach that panic state of like, "Oh, I'm not the good one. I should be the good category, and I'm not. So that means my kid doesn't have..." There's nuance to all of this, and there are ranges of these things. And the research is important because it helped us know what we need to know to get to secure spot. But don't freak out about whether or not you are secure, insecure, what category you're in. Instead, look for, "How can I learn these things in order to give my kids a more secure experience and to learn it in myself?"

Dr. Laura Markham (39:46):

Beautiful. And the emotional, everything's emotional here that we're talking about, so the emotional showing up that you're talking about doing, you were describing co-regulation earlier that the parent's showing up for the child emotionally. And I think part of your showing up for the tender moments is those messages that we're giving to the kid, and sometimes those trigger us. So in those moments where there's a tender moment and the parents got their own stuff, how do we straddle that line?

Eli Harwood (40:24):

What I tell myself in my own head is be there for them. And I like to imagine my kids as grownups remembering the moment that usually helps me pick where I need to be. You can get lost. You can get lost in the fear of like, "Oh, my gosh, what if I'm doing this wrong?" or "What will this person think about my parenting?" Right? You can get lost in all that. Instead, it's like, okay, this moment flash forward 30 years, we're talking about it at a holiday table, what is my kid recounting, and what is it that really matters about what I do in this moment? And sometimes that means I'm going to hold a boundary, and sometimes that means I'm going to just focus on giving compassion and understanding. But no matter what, the sense is, I care about what you're feeling. I care about what you feel. It matters to me. And so just trying to return to that.

(41:13):

Even if you're simultaneously saying, my kid is nine years old, so we're in this dynamic where, "My friends get to watch video games or play video games 24/7, blah, blah, blah. Why can't I? Why can't I?" Right? And I can say, "It's really hard when you don't get to do things that your friends get to do." I can hold that compassion, "And I know a lot of research about the way that these particular games impact your brain. And so we're going to limit them. You get this amount at this time in this way for now."

(41:44):

I'm going to do both, right? So when he's 30, he's not going to look back and be like, "Why didn't you let me play video games 24/7?" He's going to be like, "I'm so glad I had a mom who was a grown up who made decisions instead of letting the dopamine induced response of my video games make the decisions for our boundaries."

(42:03):

So you're looking at that, but I also think it wouldn't be helpful if I'm like, "What's wrong with you? Why are you pushing my boundary?" Right? Then I've got a kid 30 years later that's like, "Why couldn't you understand why? Of course, I wanted to play video games. I was a kid." So how can I offer the type of showing up that tells my kid, "I got you. I got you in the sense that I'm the parent and I'm going to do what I think is right to help you grow and develop, and I got you in the sense that I am a safe haven for your tenderness, and I've got your back"?

Dr. Laura Markham (42:35):

Beautiful. Well, my last question is if parents take away one thing from our discussion, which is we've talked about the brain and nervous system a little, but really it's about attachment and the effect on us as parents and on our children. If they take away one thing from this discussion, what would you want it to be?

Eli Harwood (42:56):

Your instinct to form a close, and secure wasn't going to be the word I was going to use. I was going to try to find a more descriptive word. Your instinct to develop a close and meaningful bond with your child and to show up for them is a neurologically adaptive instinct. Keep doing it. It will literally help your child develop a thicker prefrontal cortex. It'll help regulate their limbic system, and in the long run, it will give you the most satisfying, meaningful outcome you could possibly have as a parent, which is long-term closeness with your child.

Dr. Laura Markham (43:32):

Beautiful. Beautiful.

Eli Harwood (43:35):

I love your heart so much. It's so evident.

Dr. Laura Markham (43:42):

Yes. Well, I think we're both in work that fills our hearts with joy, with pain, with meaning. When I say pain, only because we're resonating with what so many people

are going through, and we're seeing those people grow and find fulfillment as parents, which is so meaningful. Did I hold up your book yet? I just want to make sure everybody's seen your book. And, of course, the link is down below. And I want to thank you for sharing your wisdom and your excitement with us today.

Eli Harwood ([44:19](#)):

I am so honored to be here with you. Thank you so much for inviting me.