

Strong Willed Kids Q and A with Dr. Laura Markham

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:00:00](#) Hello. This is Dr. Laura Markham. In this audio, I'll be answering some of the most common questions that parents ask about bringing out the best in a strong-willed child. Remember, we're always applying our three big ideas. We start by regulating our own emotions and behavior. Then, we connect with our child. Finally, instead of trying to control our child, we coach them to be their best self. Both by helping them with their emotions and by creating an environment where the child can thrive. So, let's see how to apply these three big ideas to daily life with children.

Question 1:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:00:41](#) Our first question is about strong-willed children, and the joke I always make when I speak about this is that the people with the easy kids, they don't come to the talks. And I think that's probably true about this course, that people with the easy kids don't take the course. So, there's a way in which, if you've got a strong-willed child, you can say thank you that your child has caused you to grow.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:01:05](#) There's a lot to say about strong-willed kids. In this particular question, the parent said she feels that she's actually tried everything, all the things that I recommend: regulating yourself, connecting with empathy, and then coaching. And she still feels that her child, her daughter, does not break through her armor and does not actually go into her more vulnerable feelings but instead, stays angry. So, I'm going to address that, but before I do, I want to speak more generally to the question of strong-willed kids, because I know a lot of you have them.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:01:41](#) And what I would say is, strong-willed kids, it's a matter of their own integrity, right? They're not going to be intimidated. They will do whatever's necessary to stand up to intimidation. With other kids, you can intimidate them into compliance, but not with strong-willed kids. The only way to get a strong-willed kid to do what you want is to connect with them so they're motivated to do it, and they **choose** to do it. That's really the only thing that works.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:02:10](#) They do like mastery, they like control; you can do a lot of that, give them a lot of choices. I think that's all really important. But really, at the heart, it's connection. I also want to say that many parents over the years have said to me things like, "Well, of course, I know I have to regulate my own emotions, but my child's being really difficult, so of course, I lose it. So, what do I do?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:02:30](#) And I get it, you know? I get how hard that is, how hard it is to self-regulate and how hard it is when a kid's being difficult and pushes all your buttons. But I would say there's no But there, you know? When you say, "I know I have to self-regulate, but..."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:02:45](#) There's no But. It won't work. This kind of parenting won't work unless you keep moving towards self-regulation. So, I'm not answering the parent really, who says she's self-regulating and I totally believe her. I'm saying that, for those of you who are listening, I would start by asking yourself honestly, are you actually doing preventive maintenance? Are you self-regulating? Are you doing daily special time? Are you doing time-ins? Are you trying to do empathy 24/7?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:03:14](#) So, I know that these things are really, really hard to do, and I totally sympathize with how hard they are to do, and if you aren't doing them, that's the stone that you have left unturned that is the next step to take. So, I would encourage you to actually really follow it, because I know lots of times, parents think they're doing these things and then, they realize as they think about it, "Well, actually,

I'm not really getting them laughing, now that I think about it. Oh, I guess he isn't really emptying his backpack."

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:03:44](#) Special time is great, sitting with her during her meltdowns is great. Does she laugh? Does she laugh daily? Because every one of these preventive maintenance things that I talk about actually... there's a reason for it, it's part of the puzzle.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:04:01](#) I'm going to assume, for the person who actually asked this question, that she is doing this. I don't know whether you are, but if you're doing daily laughter with her, and all these other things, then I'm going to say there's a piece of the puzzle that we don't have. We don't know what it is, and by the way, it doesn't happen that often. Usually, when you do all the pieces of preventive maintenance, kids change. And I hear it from thousands of parents.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:04:25](#) But there are times when they don't, and when that's the case, there's always another stone that we have left unturned that, we don't know what it is. The piece of the puzzle we don't know. And I would say that usually, it's either trauma in the child's past, or something physical. So, something physical could easily be a sensory processing issue; it could also be a dietary issue. I have seen kids over and over again...
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:04:52](#) I'm not saying it's a very large percentage of the kids, but there are kids who, when they go on the Feingold diet, you can Google it, or a gluten-free diet, that those kids change dramatically and they become so much easier to manage.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:05:10](#) So, it's usually only a piece of the puzzle, but sometimes, it's the piece that's missing that changes everything. I'm not trained in physiology, I'm a psychologist, but I would encourage you, if you've done all the other things and you're not getting traction, absolutely keep pursuing that. It's not usual for kids to walk around angry and have tantrums every day. Crying, yes, but tantrums that are angry, no. And so, there is something extra going on.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:05:43](#) And then, the final thing is trauma, if your child had a medical intervention or a difficult birth, it can cause the kind of trauma where children later are angry and can't get to the tears. And so, if you've really given, and are giving on a daily basis, good-faith effort to all of the things that I talk about in preventive maintenance, if you're actually doing those things and you're not getting traction, and your child doesn't cry, and you're really doing daily laughter with her, then something's there that's very defended, very heavily defended, and I would say, don't wait. Go to counseling. Don't take your child to counseling. That gives her the message that she's broken. Go to counseling yourself **with** your child. Take her to counseling with you, and talk about her birth trauma, or talk about whatever is your theory about the medical intervention or whatever, and help her work through that with the support of somebody who's trained. Because you deserve more, and your child deserves more.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:06:52](#) Don't just put up with the situation. Keep moving forward. It's never hopeless. Keep moving towards some sort of better place. But as I say, most of the time, when you do the basic preventive maintenance, things really do shift.

Question 2:

Parent: [00:07:11](#) I have a very defiant three and a half, almost four-year-old. How do I actually get her to do things when I need her to?

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:07:17](#) Ah.

Parent: [00:07:17](#) There are times that she's doing things that are dangerous, she's climbing up tall ladders, she's getting her baby brother up the ladders, too. She's shouting and screaming at me and throwing things. And when I need to just get her to do something because she's doing things that are unsafe, how do I actually take control or regain control if I've lost it?

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:07:34](#) Okay. So, there's two things you need to consider here. One is, how do you get her in that moment to do things? And the second is, how do you make it likely that, in that moment, you have influence with her?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:07:47](#) So, obviously, in the moment, if you don't have influence with her, the only way is force, right? And she's defiant, and there is a reason that she's defiant. My point is that if you don't want to use force to get her to do what you want, you're going to have to start a savings account with her to connect. And the more connection in your savings account, the more influence you have with her, and the more likely she's going to do what you want. It's that simple.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:08:13](#) And, you know, kids who are defiant are strong-willed kids who regard it as an infringement on their integrity for other people to try to intimidate them. They will do something you ask just because you ask it, but they won't do it because you intimidate them. So, force doesn't really work with those kids, anyway. They just become more defiant. And I have one of those kids, in fact. One of my two kids is that kind of kid, and I will say, she's 22 now, but she says if someone else had raised her, she'd be a criminal.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:08:43](#) Now, I don't think that's true, I really don't, but I take her point, which is, she would have just gotten more defiant. And so, I think with your daughter, you're getting the message really loud and clear that connection is the way to go. And I will tell you, my daughter and I are very close, and she was very open to my influence throughout her growing up, and still is. But it would never have worked for me to just order her around. It all had to come from the relationship, the connection.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:09:14](#) The tools that you've been learning through the course -- and I know you said you're only halfway through the course -- but you already have the basic tools which are about connection, empathy, special time, and routines so your child feels safe. Because defiant kids often are kids

who don't feel safe. They are out of control and they're trying to assert control. So, routines really help those kids, so they don't feel like you're just pushing them around, right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:09:38](#)

So, I would just suggest really focusing on connection. Now, in that moment when you want her to do something and she won't, I'm going to suggest the first thing you do is stop, drop, and breathe. Stop, take a deep breath, and then connect. Connect with her before you try to direct her to do anything, or redirect her to do something different, or correct her behavior. Just connect with her.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:06](#)

"Wow, you're having fun up there!" Right? Even if she's starting to do something dangerous. "Sweetheart..." And use her name. I use Sweetheart as a stand-in for the kid's name, because I don't know her name, but whatever her name is, "Sweetheart, hey, that's not safe. That's dangerous."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:25](#)

And then, you can redirect her. "Let's climb over there." Give her a choice. Strong-willed kids like choices. "Do you want to give me your hand, or jump right down into my arms?" Right? You're using your connection with her, as a way to segue into whatever you're going to redirect her to do.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:45](#)

So, I think if you try that as an experiment over the next week, you'll see a big difference in how much she cooperates with you.

Question 3:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:56](#)

This parent is asking about her four-year-old, who is strong-willed, and the parent tries to do peaceful parenting but loses her temper and yells and punishes. She says, "I can't regulate my emotions. I forget to stop, drop, and breathe, and I feel scared to ask my daughter to do something or set a limit. She might say 'I can't,' or, 'I don't

want to,' or scream. Even though sometimes it works to be playful or to use a win-win solution." We have the icing on the cake here, "And we have one-year-old twin siblings. Naturally, the four-year-old is having a hard time."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:11:30](#)

And naturally this parent is having a hard time. So, when you have a four-year-old who's very strong-willed and difficult, and you have one-year-old twins, you can expect that you're going to run out of patience sometimes. That's life.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:11:44](#)

But you can also expect that if you have twin baby siblings, your four-year-old has twin baby siblings, she's going to be a lot more difficult now. So, it's going to take super effort on your part, and every time you do lose your temper and yell, or punish or threaten, what ends up happening is that you're setting things up to be more difficult later.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:12:07](#)

I know you probably know that, sorry to rub it in, but I want to suggest to you that you really don't have the luxury of saying, "I can't regulate my emotions. I forget to stop, drop, and breathe." If that's your attitude, that you can't, then that's going to be your daughter's attitude, that she can't. She can't regulate her emotions. Of course she screams and explodes at you. Right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:12:28](#)

If you can't regulate your emotions, and you're a grown-up, how is a four-year-old going to regulate her emotions? So, I would say something needs to change here in your willingness to stop, drop, and breathe. You don't have to be perfect at it, but you have to start taking steps in the right direction because otherwise, you're role-modeling for your daughter, and she's learning what you're teaching her every day.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:12:54](#)

You mentioned that you're doing special time daily, that's fantastic, and it's also fantastic that you're trying playful parenting, that you're trying win-win solutions. And that often works well, as you said. It's fabulous. But it sounds to me like where you need some help is in working with emotions, big emotions, yours and hers, and I say that

because if you could become more conscious of your own emotions, then you won't be so volatile. You won't start screaming at her, and she will not be so volatile; she won't burst out screaming at you.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:13:26](#) So, if you can deal with your own feelings better, you'll be able to tolerate her upsets better, and you won't be so upset when she starts screaming at you, so you'll be able to set limits better. And that seems critical, also.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:13:40](#) I think there's something going on about big emotions for you, and that you probably grew up in a house with big emotions, and I think the effect that's had on you is that you're scared to ask your daughter to do something. You're scared to set a limit, because she might scream. But you know what? It's okay if she screams. It's really okay.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:14:01](#) It's okay for her to refuse to do what you ask. That's common in children. Your job is to stay calm. Not to yell back at her but to stay calm. Your job is to get in her face in a friendly way, with a sense of humor, and hold your limits, right? Now, I understand, you have to pick your battles. You also have twin babies, and you have them to manage, too. But if your daughter thinks that you won't set limits because you're afraid of her reaction, then she's going to become impossible to manage, and it sounds to me like that probably is already happening.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:14:31](#) Remember, you don't have to be mean to her. It means you connect with her, you keep your sense of humor, and you say, "I know you wish you didn't have to. It's so hard to have to stop what you're doing and get ready for bed. And now, we're going to get ready! Let's go." And then, you become the bath robot. "I always get my girls! It is time for bath!" Whatever. And probably that'll work, because notice, you haven't started screaming at her.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:14:56](#) So, I realize that strong-willed kids are a handful, but we can't ask them to do something we can't do, so I encourage you to do some work on yourself. This course obviously is designed to help you regulate your emotions,

and so, you may be on week three for all I know, but if you've given this full course your best effort, and you still feel like you simply can't control yourself and you can't remember to stop, drop, and breathe... because you did say you've been trying to do this kind of parenting for a couple of years, then I urge you to have a few sessions with a parenting coach.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:15:26](#)

There are some very good parenting coaches who have this philosophy who I've trained. You can find them on the Aha! Parenting website. Just put the word Coach into the search box. There's a directory of them. They all work on Skype. There's some really wonderful people. You know, you can see who you think you'll resonate with, and I would encourage you to do this because you deserve support. You do not have to do this alone, and we're all working with whatever we came into parenting with, but it'll make your life a lot easier even to have a few sessions with a parenting coach. And it will really help your four-year-old. And you don't need her to become more difficult, because things are hard for her right now with her siblings, and you've been struggling with this for two years.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:16:16](#)

I would say, just go get yourself some extra support. There's never any shame in asking for help. The shame is in not asking for help, and continuing to make our kids carry the baggage that we grew up with.

Question 4:

Parent: [00:16:32](#)

I have two kids that are ages three and five. My five-year-old is high-functioning autistic, and my three-year-old is extraordinarily strong-willed, which she most definitely gets from me. And I'm actually finding it more difficult parenting my three-year-old strong-willed child than I am parenting my autistic child.

- Parent: [00:16:55](#) My question is, I've been practicing positive parenting with them pretty much since they were both born, and I sometimes flip out of it when I get busy, and my focus flips sometimes, and since doing this course, I really feel like the extra time I'm spending with them, and that extra focus I'm giving them both, is really making a difference, especially to my daughter.
- Parent: [00:17:25](#) But I guess what I want to know is... because I've read all of your information about strong-willed kids and how fabulous they are, and I totally agree with you, but we still have these difficult moments, and I struggle to work out in those moments whether it's me that's being stubborn or her that's being stubborn.
- Parent: [00:17:50](#) When something really needs to get done, rather than staying firm on my boundaries, instead should I say, "Okay, okay, I guess I'm the one that's being stubborn here, let's do it your way." Do you understand my question?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:18:07](#) I think I do. Let me take a crack at that and let's see. I'm a little bit uneasy with the word "stubborn".
- Parent: [00:18:17](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:18:18](#) I hear you, and I totally understand. That's how we experience it. But more, the strength of their insistence on having their way, comes from an anxiety about getting their needs met.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:18:29](#) And that doesn't mean you've done anything wrong as a parent. It can mean that you've been a parent who has a lot of tantrums and meltdowns. It can mean that, but that is certainly not the only reason it can happen. It can happen because you have a highly sensitive kid who is very overwhelmed by their needs, or it can happen because you have a kid who tends to dominance anyway, and has a little anxiety about whether their needs will be met, so that's her go-to behavior to get her needs met.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:18:55](#) So, I think there are ways to reduce that tendency on your daughter's part that you'll hear in the call today, but you're asking about whether, in the moment, how do you make the decision about, whether to let her have her way or not? Is that what you're asking?
- Parent: [00:19:17](#) My parents, when they see her at her best with her strong-willed-ness, they often just giggle because they know they had to put up with the same thing with me. Except I call her strong-willed, and I have always been called stubborn.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:19:30](#) Okay.
- Parent: [00:19:32](#) And so, when she's doing it, I'm like, "God, is this me being stubborn or is this her being stubborn?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:19:37](#) I see, yeah.
- Parent: [00:19:39](#) And I don't know how to find the balance that works for both of us, and that's productive in the sense of parenting, that I'm not giving in, I'm still staying firm on the limits that I'm setting for her, but that I'm not breaking her. Breaking the will of a strong-willed child is one of the worst things you can do. I've often thought, "God, am I breaking her? Am I breaking her by being stubborn myself, or am I setting my firm limits and that's okay?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:20:17](#) Well, I doubt you're breaking her. It would take a lot to break her. I'm sure that you came closer to being broken than she is, based on the fact that your parents saw you as stubborn and you actually appreciate how your daughter is. So, I don't think you're breaking her, and it is certainly possible, for those of us who are strong-willed, and I count myself in that, as well, to get triggered when our kid pushes at us that way, right?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:20:45](#) And it is possible to get into power struggles. Your first thing is always, "How much does this matter? Is this of higher value?"
- Parent: [00:20:51](#) Yeah.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:20:51](#) Like, you're not going to let her be mean to her brother. The oldest is a boy, right? You're not going to let her be mean to her sibling because she is upset about something.
- Parent: [00:21:04](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:21:05](#) You're going to say, "Ah, you must be really upset, and that's not how we're going to work it out." So, there's some things you're just not going to compromise on, right?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:21:13](#) If it's something like, "Yes, you do need a bath. My goodness, you're full of peanut butter," and she's saying, "I absolutely don't need a bath," that's a question of, "Well, does this really matter? It's not a higher value if other people are going to judge you for having a child with peanut butter in her hair. You know what I'm saying?"
- Parent: [00:21:33](#) Yeah, yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:21:33](#) Those are the things that I think are questionable. And then, I would use that as an opportunity to empower her with problem-solving. I would say, "Hm. Well, I think that having peanut butter in your hair is a really bad idea. And it makes your pillow yucky, so the next day, you have a yucky pillow. And also, people will look at you funny tomorrow at school. But you really don't want to wash your hair. So, how are we going to solve this?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:21:56](#) And you know what? In those cases, I would say it's fine to decide that you're not going to go through the fight when she absolutely is immobile on this, cannot be budged, and you've got to deal with your five-year-old also, and it's getting late, and you're exhausted and you've had a hard day, anyway. It's completely fine to say, "Okay, you don't have to wash your hair," but I would give you some advice about how to say that.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:22:19](#) And this advice is for everyone whether it's a strong-willed child or a child with an alpha complex, which is basically the same thing, you would say, "Hm! I've been thinking

about this the whole time we've been talking. You want this," XYZ, and enumerate her reasons, "I want this. But you know what? I've decided that, actually, it isn't as important. Really, who cares what someone else thinks about the peanut butter?" Or, "You had a good idea a minute ago when you said we could do it in the morning. I'm willing to do it in the morning if you are."

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:22:52](#) Or, whatever. So, it's like, "Your solution was a great one, honey." Or, "You know, you've convinced me that maybe this is a good point that I should consider. I guess I was really stuck to this idea, but maybe I could consider this one." Basically, what you're saying is you're still in charge, but you're a reasonable person who's willing to make a different decision if you've thought about it. Does that make sense?
- Parent: [00:23:16](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative), and that's modeling that for her, that she'll be able to do that one day, too.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:23:19](#) Yes. And you know what? She'll be a great teenager. I have a strong-willed child that's now 22 and I did this with her, and she is the best at foreseeing how I'm going to feel about something when she brings it up to me. "Mom, I've decided to take a semester off college. I know you'll think it's a bad idea, but I think it's a good one. I know you're going to object for these reasons, and here are my answers to those reasons."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:23:40](#) It's like, okay! She's put all the thought into how she's going to stay safe, how she's going to finish school, you know? And if they do that, they're the most responsible kids ever.
- Parent: [00:23:49](#) Hm. Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:23:51](#) Okay. Thanks for your question!
- Parent: [00:23:53](#) Thank you.

Question 5:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:23:55](#) And this question is from a parent who says, "I read McNamara's book *Making Sense of Preschoolers*, and it was a helpful book, but my interpretation led me astray in one respect and has created some problems for me. McNamara talks about the necessity of a right relationship with a parent. She uses the word hierarchy, meaning one up and one down. My older son is very strong-willed. After reading this book, I felt like I needed to try to bend him to my will to have him follow me, and not allow him to make so many choices for himself, and that led me into power struggles with my son."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:24:32](#) "So, Dr. Laura, what do you think of the idea of the alpha child? How can I ensure that he doesn't feel like he needs to dictate how I care for him, but just trusts me to lead?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:24:44](#) Oh. Well, "alpha child" is a term that was coined by Gordon Neufeld; he's the author of *Hold Onto Your Kids*. It's a great book. And he talks about kids developing alpha complexes. So, he wrote the foreword for McNamara's book.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:25:00](#) McNamara's book is on my list but I have to say, I haven't read it yet, but I do like that there's a book about younger children via a Neufeld protégé. There is another one that I actually really like. In fact, I wrote the foreword to it. It's by Vanessa LaPointe. It's called *Discipline Without Damage: How to Get Your Kids to Behave Without Messing Them Up*. That's a book I really like, and as I say, I wrote the foreword to the book.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:25:23](#) So, if you have younger children and you want to follow the Neufeld ideas, he mostly writes about older kids, so that's a book to get, but the McNamara book, I can't speak to because I didn't read it. But it does sound like either you misinterpreted it, or there's something that is a little bit awry in her description.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:25:46](#) So, let me just cover the basic idea. Neufeld says that we have influence with our children because of our relationship with them. That's nothing new; you know that if you've read one blog on my website. He further goes on to say that this relationship is essential, it's not just any relationship. We are the nurturer, the protector, the guide, the supporter of the child. We're the alpha partner in that relationship.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:26:11](#) It's our job to meet the child's needs and to support the child as they grow so they can gradually meet their own needs. I mean, those are my words, but I think he'd agree with that. So, the requirement for this right relationship is that the child has to **trust** us to meet their needs. And I think that's a brilliant way of framing it, that Neufeld has come up with, and it dovetails perfectly with the attachment research.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:26:37](#) So, attachment researchers and actual attachment science -- it's not about what Dr. Sears says, which is basically, attachment parenting is a set of practices you use to be close to your kid. I don't have anything against those practices, I did many of them with my own children. But attachment **science** is based on certain theories, certain protocols that they do to do tests with kids. It's all validated research and, at this point, that attachment science is the foundation of child development. It's the way that all child development experts see children's developments in the context of what we've come to think of as attachment science.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:27:19](#) There are no doubts about attachment science, right? Not all of attachment parenting, as it's thought of popularly, has been validated by science, but definitely attachment **science** is validated. Here's how attachment science works. The most important thing is this: secure attachment is when the child trusts the parent to meet their emotional needs. Which is exactly what Neufeld is saying, and he's also an attachment theorist like I am. Meaning he was trained in attachment, I was trained in attachment, and

that informs how we approach thinking about children and parents.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:27:58](#) The thing you should know about this is that children, long before they're verbal, have made a decision about whether they can trust you. We can test them at 13 months and see what that decision is. And we also know what the most important factor is in the parent that determines how the child will act in that test. The most important factor that predicts secure attachment is how responsive the parent is to the child's needs.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:28:24](#) Again, it's just what Neufeld is saying, right? The requirement for the right relationship between the parent and child is that the child trusts us to meet their needs. Okay? So, this is just attachment theory. Neufeld describes a child who doesn't trust the parent to meet their needs as having an alpha complex. That's a really new thing, and in fact, I describe it as strong-willed. I think both of those terms actually lump together a lot of different kinds of kids under the same label, but we do know that somehow, for some reason, these children worry that the parent can't meet their needs, so the child steps up and takes charge.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:29:04](#) Maybe the parent isn't responsive to the child's needs, and the child says, "Okay, well, I'm going to meet my own needs." Or maybe the parent is having a hard time, to the child the parent doesn't seem to be in charge of handling things. I even think that sometimes, this happens in our very busy lives where, parents are just overwhelmed, and they're over-scheduled, and they're harried, and the child gets so overwhelmed that they get pushed over the edge and they don't feel taken care of.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:29:35](#) And so, again, they develop this, "alpha complex" that we're talking about, or this tendency to assert their needs no matter what with the parent. So, basically what happens here is the child stops depending on the parent. Maybe the parent has been depressed when they were little, or maybe they've been sick, or maybe it's a highly sensitive or high-needs child, maybe it's an overwhelmed

parent; maybe the child simply has a more dominating personality. Or maybe the parent -- this is important -- feels uncomfortable setting limits and being in charge.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:30:06](#) I often see this with parents who lose their tempers a lot. The child just loses respect for them. The cure for this is not about becoming a meaner authority figure. It's about meeting your child's needs.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:30:23](#) So, the mom who asked this question said, "Well, when I read McNamara's book, I started getting into more power struggles with my son, and I was trying to assert that I was the authority and he needed to follow me." I just think that's got to be a misinterpretation, and maybe McNamara's book doesn't give you the answers of how you can address this tendency in your son. I think, as always, the answers are harder than the diagnosis.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:30:50](#) But really, the answer is very simple. Make it safe for your child to depend on you. You need to see yourself as the answer to what your child needs, and then your child begins to depend on you rather than to order you around. This is a quote from Neufeld: "What we really need to figure out is how to inspire our children to trust in us to meet their needs, and to depend on us. Until we do that, we can't really do our job."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:31:17](#) So, it all starts with attachment, it all starts with your self-regulation, and yes, you do need to be in charge. But your child will fight that, you being in charge, unless they trust that they can depend on you to meet their needs. There is one more thing about this that I don't want to forget to mention to you, and to other people who are relating to this, because I know it's a very common question. There's a big push in our society today toward making children more independent. I've noticed that even within the positive parenting community, there's this idea that we should never do anything for the child that they can do for themselves.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:31:51](#) But when we push kids to be independent, and when we refuse to do things they ask, like, "Mommy, help me get my shoes on," we're telling them that they can't depend on us. So, if you have a strong-willed or alpha child, look for ways to baby them, to help them, to have them depend on you. If they're sick and needy, go overboard in taking care of them. If they show any crack in that armor and ask you for help, give them that help!

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:32:17](#) Make it clear that you love nurturing them. I don't mean you're at their command. I just think it's good to be aware that you want to give them the message that you're always there for them, and they can always be their most dependent self with you. And that's the beginning of turning this thing around.

Question 6:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:32:33](#) This is a question from two parents about their four-year-old who pushes them to their limits. I hear two questions here. When you tell her not to do something, she screams, "No!", or, "Stop saying that." So, she's defiant with you. And she's demanding, she's bossy, and she melts down if you don't do what she tells you to do.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:32:58](#) So, I love that in addition to outlining those problems, you say how you love her independence and spirit, but I also hear this is really hard to deal with. And of course, everybody listening can hear that this is a perfect description of what Neufeld calls a child with an alpha complex, that we just talked about.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:33:16](#) This is a highly sensitive child, so, that's the bossy part. She's bossy because she's anxious about making things go her way, right? Most of us who are over-controlling, it's because we're anxious. So, here's the thing: she's not going to follow your lead without feeling close to you, and safe with you. She has to trust you to meet her needs.

Defiance is not a discipline problem, it's a relationship problem. Your daughter's only four. She does want to depend on both of you, and to have you be the grown-ups and take care of her. Because you know what? She doesn't want to be in charge. It's so wearing, and it gets in the way of her other developmental tasks.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:33:55](#) Kids can't be anxious about taking charge all the time and still handle the other things they need to do to be more flexible and to laugh and to learn and to play. So, we need to help her shift back into a more appropriate feeling of depending on you, which means she has to feel safe. So, you've been working on your own self-regulation and staying calm, and that's great because if we don't do that, the child doesn't trust us. It's really important.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:34:24](#) And then, the second thing is to work on connection. That's 24/7 empathy, even when she's being difficult, and I'll say more about empathic limits in a moment, with her. It means daily laughter which, remember, stimulates the bonding hormone, so it also makes her feel closer to you.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:34:43](#) By the way, you mentioned in your question that you've done tickling with her and it didn't work. Don't tickle her. I don't recommend tickling. It often does not feel safe to kids, actually. Preliminary research seems to indicate it doesn't even stimulate the same parts of the brain that humor does, like a good joke that takes you by surprise and you laugh. And that surprised laughter is more related to the release of feelings that happens when you have your kid on your back and you're jumping around, and they're screeching with laughter, but it's partly fear, that maybe you might actually drop them. But it's not super fear, because they trust you. So, that kind of laughter is a little bit different than the laughter from tickling, we think, so I would say just don't tickle her. Not helpful.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:35:33](#) But any other kind of roughhousing that puts you in charge, like the bucking bronco thing I'm describing, she has to depend on you to keep her safe. That's a good thing. You need to be in charge with your daughter. You

mentioned in your question that you've tried all these things, connection, empathy, and roughhousing. That's part of what keeps your relationship with her healthy, but it's not going to be sufficient. She also has to really trust you to meet her needs.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:35:54](#) So, I would do those things daily, and I will also say that I've never seen those tools fail when they're combined with the empathic limits tool, loving guidance, which I'm about to talk about, and also with scheduled meltdowns when necessary. Sometimes these kids just have so much, especially her, she's highly sensitive, she's locked up so much (repressed emotion) in the emotional backpack that, if you can get them laughing, then you can get them crying, and then they make this breakthrough and they trust you. And that changes everything.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:36:27](#) I've never seen these tools fail, actually, when they're combined all together. I said I would talk to you about empathic limits, since that's what you're really having a hard time with; even though that's really part of discipline, I'm going to answer it here.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:36:39](#) Empathic limits is not just empathy. It is also limits. So, you as the parent are still in charge. The four-year-old may object, and you acknowledge that she isn't happy with what you've decided, and you acknowledge it with total compassion. "Oh, I know, you're so disappointed." And you're kind as you enforce your limit, but you get to decide the limit. This is a critical part of working with an alpha child or a strong-willed child. You give them control where you can, you know? Who they play with, what they eat within healthy choices. You're not over-controlling them. But you make the big decisions, the ones that parents need to make.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:37:14](#) So, I want to say, you have a transitional period ahead of you where you need to help your child feel safe depending on you. She has to be willing to let you take the lead, and that's going to be a gradual thing. I would have a discussion with each other about how you can be at ease

in the role of being in charge without needing to be punitive. You really have to see her bossiness, don't take it personally, see it as an attempt to get taken care of, as crazy as that sounds.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:37:43](#) And if you can do that and assert your limits, really back up your limits, get in her face in a friendly way, and just keep saying, "This is the way it's going to be, sweetheart. I know you don't like it." Don't worry about her rudeness during this transitional period. You have something much more important to address. That's your legitimacy as the leader.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:38:05](#) When she looks at you and yells "No" empathize with her. "I hear you saying no. You wish I would let you do this. I know, honey. It looks like fun, but I can't let you do that. It's dangerous." And then, if necessary, you pick her up and move her. She's four. You can still do that. Stay kind, empathize, but enforce your limit.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:38:24](#) Also, she's the kind of kid who bosses you around; when she gives you an order, consider if there's a need there that you can meet. Right? She's ordering you to sing her a bedtime song. "No! Don't say goodnight! Sing me a song!" Right? And naturally, you get your hackles up and you're like, "Hey, kid, I just spent all this time putting you to bed. I'm not singing you a song. Don't you order me around like that."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:38:50](#) So, instead, I'm going to encourage you to notice that reaction, stop, drop, and breathe, and then use your little switch. Consider if there's a need for something. Connection, maybe? She feels uncomfortable with the connection that's there. If she doesn't order you to connect, maybe you won't do it. She doesn't like that vulnerability. So, maybe she's ordering you around because she has a need that she doesn't know how to meet. What could you do to meet that need without her feeling like ordering you around is what's necessary?

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:39:26](#) I would say this, "Sing you a bedtime song? Wow! You are using a very strong voice to tell me to do the bedtime

song, right? You must be worried that I'm not going to sing to you, but you know what? I'm planning to sing you a bedtime song. In fact, I'm planning to sing you two songs. Two songs. Which two songs would you like?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:39:49](#)

So, now, this convinces her that her needs will be met, and she doesn't have to order you around to get them met. Now, there will be times when you can't give into her bossiness, like if she says, "Pizza! No! I'm not going to eat this! We have to have pizza! Order pizza right now!"

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:40:04](#)

You would treat this like any other limit if you're not going to do pizza that night. "I think you would eat pizza every night all year long, wouldn't you? I bet when you grow up, you're going to have pizza every single night, right? But tonight, we're not having pizza, sweetheart. Even though you love pizza, tonight's not the night. We're going to have other food tonight. This is what we have for dinner."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:40:24](#)

And if she has a meltdown, guess what? Don't see it as a failure on your part. Bingo. That's what you want, a highly sensitive kid like this who takes such responsibility for being in charge and is so anxious she has to control every move you make -- Of course! She needs to cry, this child! This is your opportunity to shine as the person who nurtures or protects her, understands her, to convince her by your loving patience; when she's no longer able to be in charge, your loving patience convinces her that it's safe to depend on you.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:40:59](#)

And even if it starts with anger, if you can stay in that place, she can shift to tears. And that will happen particularly if you've been building safety by doing the play and the laughter that we've talked about, and also the empathy. I want to add, children often have a lot of fear locked up inside. When I talk about the emotional backpack, I say it starts with anger, moves to tears, and I often forget to mention something really important: that your child may look like a two-year-old having a tantrum, where they're kicking and writhing on the floor, and scratching and sort of clawing their way to something.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:41:43](#) And that's fear. That's what fear looks like. If you've ever had a nightmare where something was chasing you, or where you couldn't even scream for help, you'll know that feeling of being trapped and powerless. That's fear. So, that's what your child is expressing, and sometimes kids like to push on your hands when they're feeling that, but otherwise, just stay out of your kid's way and just say, "You're safe. I'm right here when you're ready for a hug."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:42:16](#) I think the more they know we're there for them, the less they have to attack us to get us to pay attention. But it's sort of a dance, because if you say too much, then they get angry also. They need to titrate that feeling that feels so awful to them. They need to be in charge of how much of it comes up for them. And if you're there saying, "Oh, Sweetie, I know, it feels so awful," they're going to want to smack you in the face because that plunges them even deeper into it. Your empathy is effective. It plunges them even deeper into those big feelings, and they (the child) frankly don't want to do that, because it doesn't feel good.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:42:56](#) So, don't say much, say as little as possible, say, "You're safe. I'm here when you're ready for a hug." That's it! And if they yell at you to go away, you say, "I hear you. I'm moving back." And if they say, "No, no! Go further! Go away!", you say, "I'm stepping back further. I'm here when you need me." That's all you do.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:43:23](#) And then gradually, as they settle down, you can move closer, and you can move your hand onto their shoulder or their arm, and say, "Here's my hand, loving you." And if they shrug you off, you say, "I'm here when you're ready." That's it.

Question 7:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:43:38](#) This is a question about a parent's seven-year-old daughter who has big emotions, and how to not let her treat other people as doormats? Her brothers are her

main targets, and also her mom. She's very possessive, she gets in between other people if Mom is hugging them, and Mom... There's a joke here. This parent says, "It seems like 24/7 special time might not even be enough for her."

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:44:03](#) First of all, I would say your daughter's a twin. Not all twins react this way, but many twins feel they don't get enough time with their parent and they become very possessive. Also, she's very demanding. That's because she thinks her needs are not going to get met if she doesn't act this way. When she's demanding about her needs, I recommend that you try to meet her needs without her having to demand.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:44:26](#) If you can meet the need before she asks, and you can meet it in a bigger way than she's asking, she'll start to settle down about getting her needs met. Of course, your other problem is her siblings, and I think for this, you do have to enforce standards of civility with every child toward the other children. So, if she's being mean to her brothers, you say, "Oh, Honey. Words like that could hurt! You can tell your brother what you need without hurting his feelings."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:44:50](#) So, expect her to make repairs if she's mean. If she says, "No, I can't!" You can say, "Wow, it sounds like you need some help telling your brother how you feel. I'm right here. How can you ask your brother what you need without lashing out at him, without attacking him?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:45:09](#) And then, at the end of the conversation, when she has been able to say what she wants, you can say, "So, see? It sounds like he's willing to work this out with you. He's willing to give you a turn for it next. So, Sweetheart, when we first started this conversation, it was because you said something to your brother that could really hurt."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:45:28](#) And you say to the brother, "Did that hurt your feelings? If it did, you can tell your sister that." And he might say, "Yeah, it hurts my feelings when you say stuff like that to me. Don't do that."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:45:39](#) And you can coach her, if she doesn't know what to say, to say, "Sounds like your brother really wants to know if things are going to be different in the future. Do you think you can commit to him, that you'll try to do something different here in the future? You think that you can make it up to him right now?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:45:56](#) That's the way you coach a child to make a repair. Since you have such a high needs kid, all your children need special time with you, and one of your concerns was that she takes all your time. If you have a partner, devote your weekend to special time with all the kids, trading off with your partner. Because I have seen, in families with this kind of dynamic, that the other kids, for now, are well-behaved, but then something happens and they start having a hard time, too, because their sibling has been getting all the attention and they feel not loved or attended to.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:46:29](#) I really want to put in a plug here for special time with each child, even the ones who are not difficult. Even if you can't do it every day, make sure that you're doing it every week, if you can. And if you don't have a partner, I would say prioritize to trade off with a friend, that you get special time with kids, or to have a relative watch a kid, or even to pay a sitter, if that's what you need to do.

Question 8:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:46:52](#) Well, this is about an only child who's strong-willed, and the question is, "We've been using your techniques for nearly three years." The kid's five years old. "We do special time daily. We don't yell, we don't threaten, we don't punish. We do play therapy with him." So, it sounds like the child might be in therapy. "We teach him relaxation techniques, we play with him daily, we do roughhousing with him. We're working our butts off, and yet, he's

explosive, aggressive, demanding, defiant. Is this because he's an only child?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:18](#) No. The answer is no. It's not because he's an only child. It's because of something going on in your child. A child who's explosive, aggressive, demanding and defiant has a full backpack, and it might not be anything you're doing. It sounds to me like you're fantastic parents!

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:34](#) It may be that he's super sensitive. It may be that he had some trauma in his background, like at birth or an early operation; I don't know his history. It may be that he has a sensory processing issue. I have seen kids with sensory processing issues who feel constantly threatened by the world, and that makes them aggressive, and it makes them have a full backpack, so they're more demanding.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:54](#) So, I would say, leave no stone unturned to find out what's wrong. Something's wrong for your kid. If you're really doing everything you say, you're doing all the preventive maintenance. Now, I'm not hearing you say he cries daily. He should be crying daily, which will empty his backpack, regardless of what's going on. If he has an allergy, like a gluten allergy or something, and he's eating gluten, it means he feels bad physically, he's not able to handle the world, so he feels overwhelmed, so he lashes out.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:48:27](#) So, you still have to help him cry. Even though it's a physical problem, he needs to cry as often as possible to process the stuff that builds up for him. You do need daily laughter as a way to remove the top layer of feelings in the backpack, and then he needs daily tears, absolutely. But it sounds like you're doing all the preventive maintenance things. I would encourage you, do not leave any stone unturned. See if he has a sensory processing thing.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:48:54](#) I mean, he's already five. If you think he has a sensory processing issue, you really need to have him assessed. I strongly urge anyone listening who thinks their child may have a sensory processing issue to have them assessed as soon as possible, because you want to intervene with the

brain while the brain is forming. Five is on the late side. It's not that it can't work, it's just harder to change the brain the older a child gets. It's better if they're three.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:49:19](#)

So, I would just encourage you, don't wait. Get an intervention, get him assessed for sensory processing stuff, figure out whether the allergy thing could be happening. If it's just super-sensitivity, honestly, I'd be a little surprised because you're doing all the preventive maintenance, and you say you've been doing it for three years. So, if you've been doing it for three years, even a sensitive kid should be fine. There's got to be an ongoing stimulation, a source of stress for him, which will be either, as I say, sensory processing, an allergy, or something else.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:49:52](#)

And so, again, I would look at your family tree. Is there somebody in your family tree who has an anxiety disorder? It might be that your child has an anxiety issue and that's what needs assessing, because kids with anxiety issues, it means they have an overactive alarm system that gets upset at the environment encroaching on them too much. And they become, often, aggressive or explosive.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:50:17](#)

So, something is going on. Keep working on it, I encourage you, the person who submitted this, because I think if you're really doing all of this stuff, there's a reason, and it would be great if we could stop whatever that reason is from continuing to be a source of stress for your child.

Question 9:

Parent: [00:50:32](#)

My daughter's three, and as far as connection and regulating my emotions and that sort of thing, I find (those techniques) useful for our previous power struggles like, "You need to go to the bathroom," because she tends to hold it, and so, kind of working with that, trying to make it more of a game.

- Parent: [00:50:53](#) But when she's touching something that she shouldn't be touching, or she's got something in her mouth that she shouldn't be putting in her mouth, I'll simply say, "Don't walk with a fork like that," and then a power struggle ensues. That sort of thing, I just don't know how to work with.
- Parent: [00:51:16](#) I mean, I really love the examples that you give in all of your lectures. I find that sort of thing really helps me create a narrative in my head for when an issue arises, but when I say, "Oh, don't touch that. Oh, be careful, the plate's at the edge," that's where I have issues, and that's where I just need help in the right direction.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:51:40](#) Okay, great! She's only three, so if she hears you saying, "The plate is on the edge of the counter," she hears that as a criticism and it's not going to help her do anything better.
- Parent: [00:52:02](#) It's more like, "Don't put that in your mouth." And I'll say to her, "It's dirty. It shouldn't go in your mouth," and I give her an explanation, which, my mother always says to me, "Why are you explaining everything to her?"
- Parent: [00:52:16](#) My mother was definitely a yelling mother, so I'd like to break that cycle before it perpetuates.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:52:25](#) I'm hearing from you that it comes naturally to get into power struggles with her. And I'm not blaming you for that. You know, she could be one of those strong-willed people for whom it comes naturally.
- Parent: [00:52:36](#) Very, very... exactly how you've described in your book.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:52:39](#) So, when you have a kid like that, you do have to back off the control, because otherwise, you'll end up in those struggles. I love that you've made going to the bathroom a game instead of a power struggle. That's great.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:52:52](#) Putting things in the mouth, you know, it's interesting that the two examples you gave me, were touching something

she shouldn't, and putting something in her mouth. I wonder also if there's a sensory thing going on?

- Parent: [00:53:04](#) I don't know. I mean, she did have this thing where she was spitting. She would just randomly spit on the floor, so we kind of made a thing like, "Here's a cup. You can spit into your cup when you need to spit, or you can spit into the sink, or you can spit into the toilet, but we don't spit on the floor."
- Parent: [00:53:18](#) And so, that kind of resolved itself. Sometimes, she'll run into the bathroom to spit, so I gave her a constructive way to do that. But I just don't know. I mean, sometimes she'll just be sitting there and start sucking on a blanket. So, possibly, but it does seem a bit odd. Seeing that she's almost four, I'm surprised that it has come up again.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:53:43](#) Right. If it were a 18-month-old or a two-year-old, we wouldn't be surprised at all that everything went in the mouth.
- Parent: [00:53:49](#) Right.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:53:50](#) But you said, she's not even three, she's almost four.
- Parent: [00:53:52](#) Right.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:53:52](#) It is unusual, and that's why I wondered if there was a sensory thing going on, that things are going in the mouth, and that she's touching everything. So, I always look at what the need is, or the emotion, and if you address that, it really helps to change the behavior.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:54:11](#) I would say she might be one of those experiential learners who really needs to do sensory play. I would make sure she gets lots of opportunities to do sensory play with her hands, first of all, but also see if you can find something that works for the mouth, also. An example would be taking clean things that she's allowed to put in her mouth and guess what they are! Like, she's blindfolded, or she can't see them.

- Parent: [00:54:41](#) Okay.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:54:42](#) Or you even put them in her mouth, you know. "Yeah, I'm going to let you lick this and see what you think it is." I would play sensory games with her that have to do with her mouth.
- Parent: [00:54:53](#) Okay.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:54:54](#) Anything is a clue there, I think. And now, the sucking a blanket could be anything, because that's just self-soothing behavior, and normal that four-year-olds would do that. But the spitting and putting things in her mouth, I think there's something sensory going on.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:55:07](#) I would say anything with her hands that she can do, and anything with her mouth in sensory play would work. That's the first thing. Second thing is, you wanted a script. So, she's putting the fork in her mouth, and she's walking...
- Parent: [00:55:20](#) Right, or you see something and say, "Oh, don't touch that." When you're out in the street, "Oh, don't do this." Is there a way of saying, "Don't do that," without them plain-out ignoring you? Because I feel like the "Don't" part is a big problem. However, in the spur of the moment, you can't always come up with a positive way of saying no, I guess. Do you know what I mean?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:55:47](#) Yes. I know exactly what you mean.
- Parent: [00:55:47](#) Okay.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:55:49](#) In fact, in grad school, one of my professors told me that kids who hear "No" learn to think inside the box, and I made it an exercise for myself with both my kids to not say "No", to find another way to say "No", for years. And so, I know exactly what you mean. I don't think it's necessary to do that. I think you're allowed to say no, and you're especially allowed to say no when there's something important to say no about. Like, "No! That's a street," you know?

- Parent: [00:56:14](#) Right, right.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:56:15](#) But I when if it's something gross on the street that you've passed, something yucky on the street with flies on it, and your kid wants to touch it, I think what I would say, "Yuck!" Have a way of describing something like that. Like, "Yuck! It's interesting, right?" Acknowledge what's drawing her to it. "It's interesting, right? But it's sort of yucky, and I know it has germs on it that could make you sick."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:56:44](#) And then, I would say, "If you want to explore it, you can do it with a stick. We could get a stick and you could use the stick to poke it." Right? I would give her another way to meet her need. Her need is exploration, of all those yucky things on the street that bother you. So, I would say, "You could use a stick to explore the dirty thing." And do you think, if you did it that way, that she would insist on touching it? Probably not.
- Parent: [00:57:11](#) Sometimes, you know, when you're in a hurry, when you don't have the time to sit and explain... I guess there is no real magic sort of-
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:57:21](#) A magic way to get your child to obey when she's a strong-willed person who doesn't want to be ordered around? Probably not.
- Parent: [00:57:26](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:57:26](#) But I do think, over time, she learns, "When we have time, my mom lets me explore these yucky things, but with a stick." Right?
- Parent: [00:57:36](#) Right.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:57:37](#) All of these things take time. You don't always have time, but the more you do, I guess the word that would come to mind would be, indulge your child in poking it with a stick, or in taking the time to explore the fork when you're at your house.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:57:55](#) I think the more you allow the child to meet their inclinations, their needs, their desires, the more likely they will cooperate when you're in a hurry, because they know that often, when you can, you're willing to let them do it a different way, right?
- Parent: [00:58:13](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:58:14](#) So, I would say, she's there with a fork, and it scares you because she's walking with a fork in her mouth...
- Parent: [00:58:21](#) Right.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:58:22](#) I would say, "Whoop, Fork Police! Stop! Traffic light. You know what? That fork's pretty interesting in your mouth, right? Walking with it is a little dangerous because if you did trip, it could really hurt you. You can explore it with your mouth right here. It's okay. Here, just see what it feels like in your mouth, and when you're ready, take it out of your mouth and keep walking." You know what I'm saying?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:58:50](#) You're acknowledging her need. Because if you try to control everything like this that she does, to explore...
- Parent: [00:58:57](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:58:58](#) "No, don't put a fork in your mouth, you're walking. Give me that fork!" "No, don't touch that yucky thing. Come on! We're in a hurry." What's going to happen is, she's going to resist you more and more, and you're going to get into constant power struggles. Meet the need, but in a safe way.
- Parent: [00:59:12](#) Yeah, because that's what I'm concerned about, turning things into a power struggle when they don't necessarily need to be. Which, of course, in my way of thinking, is if she would acquiesce, but I guess it's more my responsibility as the parent to be the one to acquiesce. Or, redirect.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:59:27](#) Of course. She would acquiesce to this problem, but then you would have a very different human being with you. And your daughter was born this magnificent, unique person who's going to go out and make the world a better place, and change things through her integrity and strong will. And you don't want to change that. You also don't want to fight with her the whole time.
- Parent: [00:59:49](#) No, of course not.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:59:50](#) But you want to keep her safe, which is your job.
- Parent: [00:59:54](#) Okay. Thank you.

Question 10:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:59:57](#) There's a question about setting limits, and I'm really glad you asked this question. This parent says, "I'm struggling to understand the difference between consequences, natural consequences, limits, and how to prepare my son for the world where there are consequences in the world that require our compliance."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:00:17](#) I would say, first of all, I'm not worried about the world. My children never had a consequence or punishment of any kind. And they have no problem navigating the world. They're better at it than most kids, and the reason they're better at it than most kids is because they're emotionally intelligent.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:00:36](#) So, they actually know how to figure out what is needed in the situation, what's going to work in the situation, how to stand up in a respectful way to the person who is trying to control their behavior, let's say, in a way that is not okay; and when there's a consequence that is a consequence of society, like at school, and even if they don't agree with it, it seems arbitrary to them, they realize, "Okay, that's the

rules of the game and I'm going to play them so that I can get by in school and do what the teacher wants."

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:01:05](#) When you raise an emotionally intelligent child, they will be able to navigate the world. Just because the world is a cold, cruel place, we don't raise children without blankets. We raise children who have the emotional fortitude and intelligence, and resourcefulness, to go out and find blankets. And not only that, to share them with other people. That's what we're trying to do here. We're not trying to raise children the way the world might seem to want them raised. Because that's going to raise children like they were raised in the past, and there's a reason that there are so many people on medication, trying to self-medicate,
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:01:42](#) either medicate through prescription drugs, or medicate with alcohol, or simply have problems managing their emotions, whether they're medicated or not. So, I wouldn't worry about the world. I guess I would start there.
- And to distinguish these consequences, the example given in the question is, "We're trying to get him into his stroller so we can get somewhere on time, and we say, 'Hey, guess what! I have a box of raisins for you. If you get in the stroller now, you can have them on the way to nursery.'"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:02:11](#) Well, I think that, "If you do this, you can have that," that is a bribe and a negotiation. You're not actually negotiating or bribing here, or you're always going to have to come up with something for him.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:02:26](#) If you're going to give him the raisins anyway in the stroller, great! You can say, "Hey, time to go! Let's go! Do you want to climb in or shall I put you in?" And you can say, "Your raisins are waiting for you."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:02:39](#) And if he says, "What if he says, 'I want the raisins now,'" the answer is, "Raisins are for in the stroller! In we go!" Then that's not a bribe. You're being really clear. He gets in

the stroller... and part of the routine is he gets raisins when he's in the stroller. That's fine. But if you say, "Oh, how about raisins? Will you get in the stroller if I give you raisins?" by next week, he might be saying, "I'll get in the stroller but only if you give me candy." Right? That's why bribes are not so useful. You have to keep upping the ante, and they're in control.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:03:14](#)

And you were, in this case, just setting a limit, and the structure around it was, "Yeah, I'm going to try to make this a palatable situation for you, too. Because I realize you're only 25 months old, and you don't really want to get in the stroller. No problem."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:03:28](#)

So, as far as consequences go, there's no consequence here. A consequence is a punishment. Now, there are consequences that you probably think of as consequences, that are natural consequences like... The natural consequence of, as you're in the stroller, being wheeled along, and you hold your raisins out over the sidewalk, and somebody jostles you and they get bumped out of your hand, and they fall all over the sidewalk, that's a natural consequence.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:03:56](#)

You might say to your child, "Ooh, when you hold them out that way, I'm afraid you might lose them, they might fall on the ground," and your child might say, "No, they won't! I'm holding them," you can say, "Yeah, but someone could bump you. I'm worried." And then it happens. Your child's going to be upset and they'll be angry at you, and they'll be angry at the person who jostled them, but they will learn not to hold those raisins out, right? So, you certainly don't have to punish your child for holding the raisins out. The consequence will happen or it won't, right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:04:20](#)

And as far as punishment goes, about the stroller, if you're punishing your child for not getting into the stroller, you're just setting up a power struggle. Why would you even want to do that? So, I hope that made it clear-the difference between these different approaches. I hope so.

Question 11:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:04:38](#) Now I'm hearing from a parent who says, "If my strong-willed four-year-old is in a 30-minute swim lesson, and she decides 10 minutes in that she's not going to swim anymore, how do I let her know how disappointed I am? Because she's wasted the teacher's time..." Well, the teacher's time isn't wasted at all. The teacher's being paid for all 30 minutes, so that's irrelevant, frankly. "Her nine-month-old brother's time..." Her nine-month-old brother doesn't care about her finishing her lesson.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:05:05](#) This is not about the nine-month-old brother, "And your time." That, I get. You took her to swim and she's leaving. But everything that happens with our children is a golden opportunity for working through something. So, you haven't actually had your time wasted. Really, what's happened here is that she has wasted your money and she is not learning to swim. And I get that swimming is very important to you. I get that; many of us have this. I think swimming's a non-negotiable thing, we want them to know how to swim, it's a safety issue.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:05:41](#) So, I totally get that you want her to learn to swim, and that you're very disappointed about it. I totally get that. But I want to say, this isn't really about your disappointment. You said you'll express your disappointment and she doesn't seem to take it in, and then, how many times do you have to say it so she gets it?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:06:00](#) I would say she's not going to get it until you listen to her first. Right? I'm hearing here that there's something missing in your interaction, but it's not that she's not listening to you. I'm hearing that you're not listening to her. So, if she mostly likes to swim, which is what you said, but 10 minutes into the interaction, she decides she's not going to swim, something is going on.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:06:22](#) Either she suddenly got scared because the teacher introduced something new, like put your face in the water; well, that's not a fight, and it's not a disappointment. It's like, "Oh, my. You were scared," right? Or maybe, 10 minutes in, she does this because it's the most provocative behavior she can think of, because there's a power struggle going on. So, I don't know what happened in this instance, and I doubt it's only about this instance, but if it's only about swimming, then there's something going on with swimming.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:06:49](#) If it's about other things, then I would suggest that there's a power struggle going on, and if you go on and on about how you're disappointed, you're making the power struggle worse. First of all, if it's really about a power struggle, I'll tell you what to say to her in a moment, but in general, your job is all about connection and special time and all that kind of stuff.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:07:17](#) If there's a nine-month-old baby, that could well be what's going on, where she's upset about the baby, and this is how she's showing you, and she's asserting some control over her life, right? So, I'm hearing here, you're focusing on your disappointment. It has nothing to do with your disappointment. This is not just for this parent, this is for everybody listening; when your child is exhibiting a behavior you don't like, you (feel like you) want to communicate your upset to them.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:07:47](#) I get it. That's **not** where you ever begin. You take a deep breath and you notice you're upset. The kid has just gotten out of the pool, she's dripping wet, it's 10 minutes into the lesson, she says, "No, I'm not taking the lesson today. I refuse."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:08:00](#) Well, in the old days, someone might have forced her back into the pool. That's a sure way to get her to hate swimming! You don't want to do that, obviously. Instead, you notice your own disappointment. You want to communicate it to her. In fact, you're in a state of

emergency, so you feel an urgent need to communicate it to her.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:08:16](#) No. Instead, you look at your daughter, you look at the teacher... You stop, drop, and breathe. Stop, take a deep breath... Now, you're in the moment, you notice your body, you notice all of your thoughts. "Oh, she'll never learn to swim! Oh, I can't believe we've wasted money on this! We won't even get our money's worth out of it." Blah, blah, blah, blah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:08:40](#) Suddenly, your mind's on its own tangent, so you take another deep breath, you rein your mind in and you say, "We're just right here, right now, dealing with this issue." You look your daughter in the eye, you take a deep breath, and you smile at her. You're connecting. You're managing your own emotions; you're connecting. Then you look at the teacher and you smile at her. And then you say, "What's going on, Sweetie?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:09:07](#) And the teacher says, "She doesn't want to swim anymore today."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:09:11](#) And you might even say, "That's disappointing." Right? "That's disappointing," and you look at the teacher and you say, "I know you were looking forward to giving her her lesson." And say, "It's disappointing for me because we rushed to get here on time, right? And brought your brother and everything."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:09:29](#) But you must have a reason. "What's going on, Sweetie?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:09:35](#) "I just don't feel like swimming." That's a power struggle. That's her asserting her control.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:09:40](#) Or she might say, "I don't like putting my face in the water." That's a whole different thing, where you would say, "You don't like putting your face in the water? Oh, I see. Wow." In that case, you negotiate with the teacher, and you help your daughter negotiate with the teacher, you know? "You can tell your teacher, 'I'm not ready for

that yet. Can we do something else today?' That's okay. You'll be ready soon for that."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:10:02](#) But if she says, "I just don't feel like swimming today," then you can say, "Hmm. You just don't feel like swimming today? Wow. Wow. Hm! Well, you know, we came all the way here. And also, you have your bathing suit on, and our lesson goes for half an hour. So, I'll tell you what. We'll sit here and we'll talk on the edge of the pool, and when you're ready, you can go back in again. You don't have to go in right now." So, you're ceding control.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:10:30](#) You're not leaving, though, so she can change her mind, right? You're leaving that open. "We're going to sit here at the edge of the pool and watch the other kids in their lessons," or whatever's going on... I mean, I don't know if this is an individual lesson, but if it is, you can say, "And your teacher will be over there if we need her, because we've already paid for the lesson, so she'll be ready to work with you when you're ready. Come on over here with me and your brother for a minute."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:10:52](#) Now, remember, she's watching you having fun with the nine-month-old while she's in the pool. This could just be about jealousy. And you could say to her, "Your brother wishes he could go in the pool with you. We love to see you swim. Your brother is so jealous because he watches you swim, and you get to swim, and he can't wait until he's your age." And then you say to the brother, "You really want to see your sister swim like she was doing, right? And how she really kicks and kicks and splashes, right? Could you kick your feet? Show him how you kick your feet, Sweetie. Can you go back in the pool and show him?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:11:24](#) So, if she says, "No, I'm done swimming," unlikely. Mostly, she'll probably dive back in the pool at this point. But if she says, "No, I'm done swimming," you say, "Okay. You can go back in when you're ready. I hear you're done for now. We still have another 15 minutes left on the lesson. You can go back in when you're ready. Would you like to go back into the pool in five minutes? Should we set my phone for five

minutes? What do you think? Let's sit here and sing for five minutes. Let's laugh for five minutes."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:11:51](#) You know, yoga laughter where you laugh, you can just start laughing, and your nine-month-old will definitely start laughing, and then, she'll start laughing. And that diffuses the anxiety, it diffuses any fear, and it defuses her anxiety that's making her act out.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:12:09](#) So, as you can see, none of this is about showing her your disappointment. Now, let's say she goes the whole half an hour sitting out of the pool. That's okay, too! Or let's say she demands to go home. That's okay, too. If she demands to go home, you can say, "No, Sweetie, we paid for our lesson, so we need to be here. But we can play at the edge of the pool while we decide if you want to go back in, in case you change your mind and join the lesson later."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:12:35](#) And if she doesn't go back in the whole time, if it's not about fear of swimming, then I would take it as a red flag that you need to do some work with one-on-one time with her, because she does have a nine-month-old sibling, and also getting her more control in her life, so she doesn't have to pull rank at these times.

Question 12:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:12:59](#) Here's a question from a parent who says her almost-five-year-old is so persistent that he just goes after the things that she says no to. And climbs up high, or says, "I don't care, I'm going to get it anyway." So, I would say this is a connection problem. It's defiance. It's him saying that what he wants is more important than your relationship with him.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:13:24](#) I know that's the sign of a strong-willed child. They want what they want, and you can't intimidate them into doing what you want. Because to them, to a strong-willed child,

they're not going to be coerced or intimidated. They, in fact, regard that as being a sell-out, and a compromise to their integrity. So, the only reason a strong-willed kid will give up what they want, is because there's something they want more.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:13:55](#) And usually, what they want more is the relationship with you. That's true for all children. But more compliant children who are more easily intimidated will go ahead and go along with you, and when you put something up high they'll say, "Okay, I'm not going to climb up and get it. I'll get in trouble. Mom will be mad at me." That's not a strong-willed child. That's a compliant child.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:14:15](#) And they're easier when they're little, but they won't have better lives, and they won't necessarily give you easier teen years because they're more compliant with their peers, too. You don't want that in a child, if you can help it. You want a strong-willed child. But I actually think this is more innate. I'm not sure if there's anything you can do to create it one way or the other.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:14:36](#) I do think the only way to raise a strong-willed child like this is for them to want the relationship more than they want to climb up high and get that thing you said no about. And that means you have to really ratchet up your connection game. You have to do special time. It's non-negotiable. Every single day with every individual child you have that's strong-willed, there's no way you can skip it. It's just not optional.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:15:03](#) You have to be empathic 24/7. You have to say, "I hear how much you want that thing that's up high. You wish you could have 10 of those things! When you get big, you'll fill your house with those things! I know, and right now, we're not going to have it. I know you want to climb up there, Sweetheart. I see you climbing. I love what a great climber you are. You know what I was thinking? We should register you for that rock-climbing class down at the Y. Wouldn't that be great? Because you are so fearless about getting up high. A lot of people aren't like that. They

don't like getting up high, but I see you. You're like a mountain goat."

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:15:40](#) "And you know what else I was thinking? We should go hiking this weekend. And we should be scrambling over the rocks the way you scramble. Here, I'm going to lift you down, and I want you to show me how you scramble. Go on, over the couch! Let's see you go! How fast can you do this?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:15:53](#) That's Yes energy. That's building a relationship in the face of setting a limit. Now, you may be thinking to yourself, "Look, I'm busy. I can't be doing that all day, every day." I get it, I get it; you shouldn't have to. But we don't get to fill out the order, like a menu, for the things we want in our child. When we get a strong-willed child, that's the child we got, and the child didn't ask to be born to us. We have to step into the role and be the best parent we can be for that child. We owe it to them. That's our sacred responsibility. And in this case, and really, probably in every case, I bet if you ask yourself, you look into your own heart, you don't have to say this to anybody else, but just look in your own heart. Maybe there's someplace that you're going to grow from this, too.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:16:45](#) I've seen over and over again, where we're asked to grow as parents, it also helps you to grow and heal yourself. So, you may think you should just be able to say no and he shouldn't climb up there and get it. But that's not the kid you got, and I'm telling you, what I've just outlined is the way for you to get the kid that you want, which is the kid who cooperates even though he'll never be a compliant kid. But you are going to be so proud of him when he gets older, if you're not already.

Question 13:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:17:20](#) A parent is asking how to handle a child who's strong-willed, when connection doesn't seem to be producing

results? "We've been attempting to use your approach for almost a year now. Our five-year-old still screams, hits or runs away if she doesn't like dinner. We both make time for daily connections. We try to use calm voices and model appropriate behavior. Still, she hits or screams, or becomes inconsolable when she doesn't get what she wants. How do we make sure she's learning appropriate behavior?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:17:47](#)

Well, your daughter's behavior does sound intolerable, especially because it sounds like you work so hard to stay calm with her. And she is five. But I think you have an even bigger problem than whether she's learning appropriate behavior. Clearly, your five-year-old is living in a state of emergency that's causing her to lash out at even small disappointments.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:18:06](#)

So, something is very wrong for her. When you say she becomes inconsolable, that's a good thing, if you're able to hold her and commiserate with how hard everything seems to her. If you're able to offer her that extreme understanding, then after that inconsolable crying, she should be relaxed and affectionate with you. But that would also change her behavior so that she's not in such a state of emergency the rest of the time.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:18:28](#)

The fact that that's not happening either means that she doesn't cry inconsolably, despite your use of that word, or that you're not able to show up for her with understanding when she does cry. And either way, she's not actually emptying her emotional backpack.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:18:44](#)

I want to point out that you mention that you've been peaceful parenting for a year, but you don't mention any of the tools. 24/7 empathy, daily laughter, roughhousing, special time, routines, scheduled meltdowns, and I have to say, I have never seen those tools fail when they are used daily along with empathic limits and parental self-regulation.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:19:06](#) Now, I have seen children who have special issues and who continue to have those special issues. So, they are still a handful, and they're still really hard to manage. But every child I have ever seen, when the parents used the peaceful parenting approach, the child improves with this approach. And that's true for kids who are on the autism spectrum, kids who are bipolar, and I'm not hearing that your daughter has any of those issues.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:19:31](#) At any rate, if you have been using the peaceful parenting approach to the best of your ability for a year, and your five-year-old still screams and hits when her sister gets attention, which is one of the things you mentioned, then you definitely need to get some parenting coaching. I have seen other parents on the Facebook forum say that it took them a year to really see a breakthrough in which their child finally cried, and then everything changed.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:19:55](#) But that does seem like a long time to me. I think your daughter's getting older and her brain is taking shape every day, and we don't want these to be ingrained habits. So, I strongly recommend parenting coaching to fine-tune your use of the tools, and to make a recommendation on whether you need to have your daughter assessed if there's something that's going on with her that you're not able to really cope with just by using the support you already have in the form of the tools.

Question 14:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:20:21](#) This question is from a parent who says, "My four-and-a-half-year-old is very strong-willed. Do I give in too much to her desires just to keep the peace? Will this result in her growing up bossy and entitled? We do keep strong limits, like no candy, no TV, being kind." Well, if you keep strong limits on those things, that's what matters most, I think you're okay.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:20:43](#) And I'm hoping that even though you give a lot, in general she does follow your structure, meaning she does have a bedtime and an occasional bath, et cetera. So, I think she's probably going to be bossy because that's who she is already. If you can keep your remarkable, wonderful patience to partner with her on things, you can help her learn to have relationships that have a little give-and-take, especially as she gets older. But the wonderful thing is, you have figured out how to keep strong limits on what matters most, like being kind, and yet, not have constant power struggles.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:21:12](#) So, I'd say good for you. It sounds like you're doing great, and she's going to be fine.

Question 15:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:21:18](#) Our next question is from a parent who asks, "Our strong-willed daughter often refuses to continue walking when something has upset or annoyed her on the way home from school. I don't want to resort to, 'If you don't come now, there won't be time for XYZ at the end of the day when we get home,' but it's hard to think of other solutions at the end of the day."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:21:36](#) I think it's fine to resort to that if necessary. It's not really a threat. It's true that if she doesn't walk, you won't be able to get home and do whatever that is. But when she's upset, it probably is hard for her to be able to look forward to something. So, the question is how to help her deal with the upset, which is, of course, a total hassle when you're out on the street.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:21:56](#) And first, of course, you have to completely offer empathy. "No wonder you're upset. I would be upset about that, too. It didn't work out the way you planned," et cetera. But then, "We do need to go home to do XYZ that you're looking forward to. And if we don't get there

soon, there won't be time to do that. But when we get home, can we work together to solve this problem, or to prevent this problem from happening again?" And partner with her.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:22:25](#)

You know, it's hard for anyone when they're angry to get out of that place, so really, the question is, how do you get her past the anger so that she's willing to move on with her day? And the fastest way ever to get someone past their anger is to empathize with them.

Question 16:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:22:44](#)

Our next question is from a parent who says, "I wonder if Carol Dweck's recommendations work on strong-willed gifted kids. Despite our best efforts, our seven-year-old has a fit whenever he doesn't know the answer to a question. It's as if he's putting loads of pressure on himself, as if his worth as a person depended on knowing the answer. What do you suggest we do beyond Dweck's recommendations, to help him see the value of making mistakes, of learning, of effort?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:23:10](#)

First, what you're describing is perfectionism. It's a form of anxiety. Some people are born more anxious than others, but I also don't think it's innate that people put that kind of pressure on themselves. I think that when they're babies, often the first child ends up with a lot of focus from the parents, because first born children are notoriously more perfectionistic than later kids.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:23:40](#)

And I think all that attention is not good for them. It's very important that we're responsive to our child when they express a need, but it's also important that they are not the center of attention all the time, because that makes them feel like they have to perform. If we're hanging on

everything they do and looking delighted by everything they do, that's a lot of pressure on them. They can't just get on with their lives and explore things. They have to perform.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:24:07](#) And when kids feel like they have to perform, then there's a lot of anxiety about performing well enough. And we often inadvertently create this situation with babies, when they're quite young, without realizing that's what we're doing.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:24:22](#) I'm not about withholding encouragement ever, but when a baby or a toddler is exploring something, for us to say, "Good job," basically destroys their momentum to explore. It's not empathic at all. It's an evaluation, and it puts them on the spot to perform, right? The "good job."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:24:46](#) So, the less we can evaluate babies and toddlers, the better. And the more we can simply empathize when they show us something; we say, "Yeah! I see!" Or, "You did that!" Or, "Wow, I saw you do that!" Right? You're not evaluating, "Good job!"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:25:06](#) So, I don't know how you treated your son as a baby or a toddler, and maybe you didn't do any of that. Maybe you were a Carol Dweck fan from way back, and you knew not to do those things, and not to use "good job," and not to be evaluative. But for someone to have a fit when they don't know the answer to a question, there's a reason for that. It comes from feeling like you're expected to know the answer. Like maybe you've known answers in the past, and people have been astonished by that, and now, you have a reputation to uphold.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:25:39](#) Again, you have to perform. If you don't know the answer, then your self-worth is in jeopardy. You mentioned that your son is gifted; you don't have to be gifted to be a perfectionist. There are many people who are perfectionists who are not particularly gifted. But it's certainly true that the fantasy that you will always know the answer would be more sustainable if you're gifted,

right? You would be more likely to know answers, and your self-worth could easily derive from impressing people with your gifted-ness, right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:26:15](#)

I think when kids are gifted, we often respond to them in a certain way, that we expect them to know the answer, and we test them. So, again, I'm a big fan of not evaluating kids, even in our own minds, as gifted. They're who they are. So, we just treat everything matter-of-factly so that we're not seeing them as gifted, and then, they're not as likely to see themselves as needing to perform in a gifted way.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:26:50](#)

I mean, all kids like to be right. But their whole self-worth doesn't hinge on being right. So, the kind of parenting that I suggest helps kids develop an unshakeable inner happiness that is not dependent on the world going their way, and it's not dependent on them being perfect. Doing this kind of parenting will help, and I'm assuming you haven't been doing it his whole life, because he probably wouldn't have this kind of perfectionism if you had been.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:27:21](#)

So, to help him with this issue, is the kind of parenting that I suggest, but he is already seven, so when you say, "How can we help him see the value of making mistakes, of learning and effort?", you're right. You do have to talk about those things with him. And I would make it a family project, modeling those ideas with him, having constant conversations, talking about the mistakes you made. I do think that's important to do with all children, and especially with any child who has a tendency to perfectionism.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:27:55](#)

I would also notice, does he have other anxiety issues? Because this is an anxiety issue. And if he does, if he was born a little bit anxious, then he needs extra roughhousing and laughter, and opportunities to work through that anxiety, and that fear. And one way you can do that is by teaching him mindfulness practices that can help him to calm his race-car brain so that he can feel more at ease in

who he is, as he is, without having to perform and be a certain way.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:28:28](#) And then finally, Carol Dweck's recommendations do work on strong-willed gifted kids. They basically say, focus on effort, and don't focus on product, right? And I think universally, human beings are freed when we emphasize that they are more than enough the way they are. Practice makes perfect; those are the ways to get to what you want. Our minds are always growing. That's the growth mindset part of Dweck's work, right? And practice is what gets us to where we want to go. The idea of, "It takes 1,000 hours."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:29:13](#) So, nobody can expect, as a child, to be an expert on anything, or to know the answer to everything. Of course your son wouldn't know the answer to that. He's a kid. But I would be really careful: no evaluation, no testing, no expectation that he knows anything. Make sure he's never in a position where he has to show off, or feels the need to show off, or gets credit for showing off.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:29:40](#) If he has a habit of showing off to the grandparents or anybody, to you, obviously, your response is, "Wow, you must really love learning about that, to know so much about it. That's wonderful! What do you find most interesting about it?" So, you're not validating his showing off, or his achievement. You're validating his curiosity, right?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:30:05](#) I think that as he has these conversations with you, and as he finds that you do not treat him as gifted, you treat him as who he is, and you value his curiosity and his hard work and his practice, rather than what he knows, I think you'll see that he'll feel more freedom to just be who he is, and that means his imperfect, curious, still learning, still growing, seven-year-old self with no labels about being gifted.

Question 17:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:30:47](#) Our next question is from a parent who says, "My four-year-old daughter is very strong-willed. Our issue at the moment is crossing the road. She normally walks well with me on our own, but since starting school, when other kids are around, she has the tendency to impulsively run off straight across the road, and she doesn't listen when I call her to stop. And I have the buggy, and I can't stop her. Often, it seems like she's showing off. We practice and talk about it, but how do I set a limit there in the moment?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:31:13](#) So, you say this is a new problem that's arisen since she's around other kids on the street and she wants to show off. I would have a very serious discussion with her, a problem-solving discussion at home, about how she could die by running across the road. Does she notice that the other children are not running? It is her job to keep herself safe, and it's your job to be her backup. What plan can the two of you agree on?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:31:36](#) Write it down. Sign it, both of you. I would insist on this part of the plan. In the moment, when she will have the urge to run across the road, you will be holding her hand or, better yet, she'll be pushing the buggy and you'll be holding her arm. You two will have some sort of reminder code like, "Safety first!"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:31:53](#) Every time she resists running, give her enthusiastic encouragement on how amazed and impressed you are that she was able to give up what she wanted, to run across the street, for something more important: staying alive. And by the way, I would also talk about how it feels for her to run across the street with the other kids watching, and what she likes about that. Is there any way she can have the kids admire her some other way, for doing something else? And are they actually even admiring her when she does this, or are they thinking that she's taking a dangerous risk?

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:32:28](#)

And that's all our questions for today. Thank you for listening, and I hope this was helpful. If you still have a burning question that wasn't answered on this audio, please submit it for possible inclusion on my podcast. Just go to ahaparenting.com/podcast and leave your question as a voice memo. This is Dr. Laura Markham, wishing you less drama and more love. Goodbye for now.