

## Emotion Coaching with Toddlers Q and A with Dr. 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 emotion coaching with toddlers. 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. Let's see how to apply these three big ideas to daily life with children.

### Question 1:

Dr. Laura Markham:

A parent is asking a question about their two and a half year old having a meltdown. They say "I empathize, but he cries harder and pulls away like he's trying to block me out. It almost feels like I'm making things worse. It takes a long time for him to calm down." Imagine you're upset. You're trying to hold it together. You're at the hospital and you've just gotten very bad news. You're trying to stay calm, but you're very upset. Someone you love comes in, and they take you in their arms and they say, "Oh my goodness." What happens? You burst into tears, right? You cry harder because you feel understood.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:01:19](#)

Now, the reason your child cries harder is that your presence and your understanding are intensifying his emotion, the way he feels these intense emotions. Naturally, he's going to pull away because of that. He doesn't want to feel those painful emotions. And so it's fine to let our children be in control of how much they can handle. But it's also true that none of us like to be uncomfortable. I think it's good for children to learn that they're safe with these emotions, that we're there. We will hold them. They can make it through. It's okay to be uncomfortable. It's okay to feel distressing emotions. You're there to soothe them. They will be okay. And they learn that they can make it through. So, it's fine to let your

child be in control of how much they can handle. If your words are upsetting him to the point where he pulls away, just stop talking. Just stay fully compassionate and attentive to him. Now, the calming down for a long time thing, it might be that he's highly sensitive. That means kids who feel more deeply, you store up more pain, they have more upsets to show you.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:02:24](#)

Therefore, when they tap into that full backpack, they have more to unload. It's also possible that he's reacting to something in his past, not just the upsets of the moment. I've seen little ones who had traumatic births or maybe their parent went to the hospital when they were a baby or something. They needed to do a lot of extra crying because of that early trauma. And they did cry more often and for longer. They were harder to calm down. But you're not trying to calm them down exactly. Right? You're trying to witness. As they got the opportunity to cry, those kids become sunnier and more resilient. Regardless of the reason that he has so many upsets to express, I think in between tantrums, you should be seeing a happier boy by now. I do agree that if you just left him to have the tantrum run its course, he would pull it together faster. But that just means he wouldn't feel safe to feel the emotions, and he would repress them. And over time, that would make him less resilient and more volatile. It's definitely not what you want to do.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:03:26](#)

I think you're giving your son a huge gift, not only by allowing him to process these big emotions now, but by teaching him that emotions aren't dangerous, that he can handle them. Over time, that will help him wire a brain that is less reactive and that recovers faster, is more resilient.

## Question 2:

Parent: [00:03:47](#)

We read your book when our son was very young. He's three now. We were just really blown away by it because we both were raised in corporal punishment type scenarios. Loving parents, but a very different mindset. We just saw a lot of the repercussions later in life, especially

me. I said, "That's me, that's me." Always feeling like I'm a bad girl, things like that. So, we just decided to really parent differently than our parents. Our boy is three now and I feel like my husband is really on board. We're both on board and we both feel like it's a real learning process for us, especially dealing with a toddler. But something my husband will say a lot is "What do I do?" Especially in the face of defiance and things.

- Parent: [00:04:37](#) I think what I'm hearing from you is that, this is a long term approach, just really working on the empathy and the relationship and the connection so that we don't even have some of these things to deal with down the road.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:04:52](#) Yeah.
- Parent: [00:04:55](#) The question I'm having though is ... We've been trying to practice time-ins, especially when our son has a meltdown over something like turning off the TV or something simple, but I feel like my husband sometimes will approach it sort of like a threat. Like, "Do you want to have a time in?" I'm not sure if that's the way we should do it. I think we should be doing it different because I think he and I, again, are used to this different way of doing parenting from our parents. I sometimes feel like it almost comes across like a threat or a punishment to go have a time-in with daddy, especially with daddy because I'm home with him all day. So, it's different with daddy. But I don't know if that's the way to approach it.
- Parent: [00:05:42](#) One thing you said at one point in your book or your class, was instead of using my words a lot, going up and actually taking him by the hand and taking him over to something I want him to pick up. That's actually worked really well for me. So, if I do a time-in with him, I'll actually just take him in the room and we sit in a certain chair. And I just sit with him. Whereas I think with daddy, sometimes, it becomes like that threat. How do we redirect that and do it in a more healthy way?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:06:15](#) What's the purpose of the time-in? The purpose of the time-in is to help the child feel safe enough to actually show you those upset feelings. Right?

- Parent: [00:06:23](#) Right.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:06:24](#) It's not even really to help them calm down. People say, "Well, the good thing about a timeout is it calms them down, but we started doing time-ins and they still calm down there. But it's not really about calming them down, because that could just be stuffing it. It's really about listening to what they're telling you, emotionally. And so if the kid is getting upset, defiant let's say, and they start to cry or they start to scream, and you say, "Do you want a time in?"
- Parent: [00:06:54](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:06:58](#) Do you think they're going to want to show you their feelings? I don't think so. I think, at that point, you would say, "Oh my goodness, you are having such a hard time. Come here, sweetheart." And you would pick them up and go to that same chair that you always go to, and you might not say much. You don't need to say much. If anything, you say, "I'm right here. You're okay. You cry as much as you need to. I'm right here." That's all you say. At the end of it, then you can have a conversation about it, "You were so upset about X, Y, Z. Yeah." Right? And that's it. If they did something inappropriate, like throw something at you, you would say, "You were so mad. You threw that at me. Right? Yeah. Throwing is dangerous. If that hit me, it could really hurt. Throwing is not okay. You can tell me in words. I'll always listen. What did you want to say to me?" "I didn't want that cup." Or whatever they're going to say. It's like, "I hear you. Tell me that." Right? I know *you* know this from what you're telling me. Does this makes sense to your husband?
- Parent: [00:08:13](#) Yeah, I think. He's really on board with trying to do it. I think regulating our emotions is tough for both of us, especially when we've had a bad day. We've had a lot of stressors in the last couple of years. I think that's been very sobering to say, "Okay, a lot of this is me needing to take a step away, shake it off, take some breaths, before I address it." Because I think that's what the other thing is, coming up for my husband and me, sometimes, is just this instant anger. For example, if we're hit and it actually

hurts. Also, If I have my son on my lap, and he'll be arching his back and stiffening his body.

- Parent: [00:08:58](#) Sometimes I'm thinking, "Man, soon he's going to get so strong that I can't even do this." I've tried putting him in his bed, and that sort of works. But then we start playing and I feel like he's avoiding his emotions. Like, "Now, I'll jump on the bed and I don't have to feel what I'm feeling." I think that's the other thing that my husband is struggling with, is, "What do I do?" Because when we hold him tight, it almost heightens his emotion if we're holding him too tightly. That's the other element, is now he's getting a little more physical. Now that he's three, it's almost this logical thing of, "I didn't want you to turn off the TV, so my anger is logical." Which it is logical, but we are saying, "We're done with TV." Let's say that's the example.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:09:46](#) Taking that example, he's upset. You don't necessarily have to take him anywhere to have that time in. He's allowed to be upset. You turned off the TV, and you say, "You wish you could watch TV all day. I know."
- Parent: [00:10:01](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:02](#) "Bye bye TV. I know that makes you sad." He's allowed to be sad. He's allowed to cry. That's that.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:08](#) Right? He's not hitting you, it doesn't sound like. He's just crying.
- Parent: [00:10:13](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:14](#) He's allowed to do that. He's allowed to be disappointed. He's three. When you're worried about what's going to happen later, he's only three, he's gonna change a lot. He's not going to cry like this for much longer. Four year old boys don't necessarily cry a lot. He may. He may be one of the ones that does. But by the time they're five, they don't. This is not going to last much longer. Actually, it's harder to get them to express their feelings once they're past the crying stage. Crying is really good because after the crying, how is he? Does he seem connected and cooperative?

- Parent: [00:10:49](#) Oh yeah, very loving. Actually, he's so tender. That's one reason we've decided to approach parenting this way, is because he's so sensitive and tender. He will cry and then hug me, and want to look at me, and kiss me. He's an amazing kid. I think it's just those moments we're trying to work through whatever's coming up.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:11:13](#) Before he's gone into the crying, he's been angry about the TV or whatever. He might be screaming or crying, angry. But then once he cries, you're saying he's connected and affectionate and cooperative. So, you can see what a difference it makes when he feels safe enough to show you the feelings.
- Parent: [00:11:30](#) Oh, yeah. I think so. Yeah. I think when it doesn't feel safe, things just get heightened. My husband and I, we haven't been perfect. We've had moments where maybe our tempers get the best of us, especially late at night if something's going on. We just see immediately see how it's putting fuel on the fire. It's just makes it all worse and makes it go longer. And so we're really working on that.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:11:54](#) Good for you. I would just close with the fact you pointed out, which is, "It's all about the parents' self regulation." Because no matter how difficult your kid is, and there are many children in the world who are really challenging, it will be worse if you escalate the drama. And it will be better if you don't. Your ability to self regulate makes a tremendous difference. I love that you're doing this kind of parenting. You have the course there to go back to. If you haven't read my workbook, the first half of it about how to get your own regulation in order and nurture yourself. So, you might find that really helpful on the journey.
- Parent: [00:12:37](#) Yeah. We're going to do your workbook as well, which we just got. We're working through the course as well, so we're really thankful for all your tips and tools. Thank you. I just wanted to make sure we weren't approaching the time-in's in an unhealthy way, so thank you.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:12:52](#) You're so welcome.

**Question 3:**

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:12:55](#)

The question is from a parent who is saying, "Our three year old has phases where she's more difficult than usual. In getting her to cooperate or laugh or relax, we attempt to empty her backpack, but she's resistant to most of our attempts. She only wants to play a certain way, and it's not cathartic as far as we can tell." You're totally right, that when kids are dealing with the developmental leap, they have a harder time. The fact that she gets rigid and only wants to play a certain way at those times is an indicator that she's probably feeling anxious, meaning overwhelmed with the internal demands of whatever that developmental leap is, or maybe external demands also are possible. I don't think that means, though, that you should give up on your usual preventative maintenance. I think at those times when kids are stressed, they need laughter more than usual. They need crying more than usual, especially if they're three, and they need empathy more than usual. When she gets resistant to emptying her backpack, by which I assume you mean she's not open to crying, she's also probably not so open to laughing. She might be tense and grumpy.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:13:56](#)

Your job, at that point, is to figure out ways to get her laughing and create that safety with her. That would be the assignment I would give yourself, is to figure out ways when she's like that to get her laughing. I think you'll see that you'll shorten those phases. Even though she will still go through them, you'll find that she's easier to deal with than she used to be when she went through a developmental leap.

**Question 4:**

This parent is asking about her two and a half year old having serious meltdowns when she's tired. She can't put her to bed earlier, because she has an older sister who she sleeps with. I'm going to suggest that you put her to bed anyway. If she's tired and needs to go to bed, put her to bed. It can't be good for her to always wind up in that state where she's screaming. It can't be good for anyone

else in the family either. I understand it's harder then to put your older child to bed. Maybe you can do bedtime stories on the couch for your four year old.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:14:54](#)

And when you go into the bedroom with her, then use a flashlight and whispers. I have heard from many parents that that solves the problem of a shared room and different bedtimes. It can work. Experiment with that. Don't look at it as something you can't change because when a kid needs sleep, they really need sleep.

### Question 5:

Dr. Laura Markham:

This question is from a parent who says that his three year old son wants to control everything and gets angry when he can't. That's a full backpack. The way you get a child to empty a full backpack, the way you help them to empty the full backpack, is basically you create a sense of safety so they feel safe to feel the feelings that are in the backpack, instead of stuffing them down. The best way we have found to do that is to laugh, to help the child laugh. That's because it, as I always say, siphons off the top layer of fear and junk in the backpack so they can get to what else is there. It also transforms the body chemistry, so the child is not as anxious, as stressed, and as fearful, but is feeling more connected with oxytocin that's released through laughter.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:16:11](#)

Maybe that's what it is. It's just body chemistry. But either way, the more children laugh, the more easily they cry. And so the more likely they'll be able to go through the backpack and let that out. It's very common when kids have a chance to laugh every single day for at least a half an hour a day, and maybe more. I'm talking belly laughs. You can't necessarily sustain that for an hour. But if you did it for 20 minutes, three times in the course of a day, then you'll find that the child is often going to find an excuse to cry, maybe bump themselves as you're playing and start to sob. That's great because then they're doing what they need to do, and they're crying. If you see a child who's being controlling and rigid, that's a sign of anxiety. Anxiety is from a full backpack. They may have a

predisposition to anxiety, but they're being anxious because they have a lot that they're trying to hold into the backpack. That increases anxiety. And so at that point you want to play with them.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:17:18](#)

This parent also says that this child says, "Repeat what I just said." He wants to prove that his parents are listening. I would say go ahead and do that. It's extremely important to him that his parents understand him, and this is a temporary thing. Once he's not as anxious, once the backpack is emptied, he's not going to feel so desperate to know he's being understood and to make you do this. It's completely fine to repeat after him routinely at this point. Remember the reason he's getting so angry is he's hurt when you don't understand him. He takes that as your not caring about him. That means to him that maybe he's not worth caring about. Every time he does that, remind yourself, instead of just getting your buttons pushed, that your son is hurt. He's worried that maybe he's not worth caring about. In fact, he's terrified of that. Just go ahead and demonstrate your caring in the way he's asking, which in this case is to repeat, "Oh, you want me to do X, Y, Z. I understand." Right? This parent also asked, "You said we should try to reach the feelings behind the anger, but you also said not to analyze." I found this question coming up over and over again in the questions people submitted, so let me try to be more clear.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:18:37](#)

Reaching the feelings behind the anger means you help the child feel safe enough to express them. You don't even have to know what they are. You certainly don't have to analyze them, and you don't have to tell the child what they are, necessarily. They just have to have a chance to express them. Once they do, the anger melts away. You know the feelings are there, so just don't get hooked on the anger. Right? You can help the child feel safe instead. And then when they feel safe, they'll show you what's behind that anger. What does that actually mean in practice? It means you describe what happened, "Oh Sweetie, you wanted my help and I didn't understand what you wanted." But then you would say, "That made you feel hurt like I don't even care about you, and alone and scared that maybe you don't matter to me." Now that's all something you could maybe say under the right

circumstances. But when somebody's angry at you, they're not going to acknowledge that they felt alone and scared and hurt. They just want you to understand that they're angry.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:19:46](#)

And analyzing, you might even go a step further. You might say, "You can't bear those feelings, those feelings of being alone and scared and hurt. So, you're yelling at me. You're lashing out at me." That's not going to work with an angry person. Right? Instead, you can acknowledge his upset so he feels understood. You might say, "Oh Sweetie, I'm so sorry. You wanted my help and I didn't even understand what you wanted. You were trying to tell me, and I still didn't understand. No wonder you're upset." Right? That's very different. You're understanding his perspective. You might even add something that takes responsibility and makes a repair so that he really feels like you want to make things better. Right? You might say something like, "You must've felt like I didn't even care about you. But you know what? I care so much about you. I'm listening now. Please tell me now, if you can." Right? You're not saying, "You're mad because you were hurt and scared." Even an adult when angry will not acknowledge that they're hurt and scared. That's why they're angry to begin with. Those feelings are too vulnerable.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:20:49](#)

This parent goes on to say, "Our understanding was that we could make him express anger by throwing a cushion or stomping his foot, but then in the audio in week four, you said expressing anger physically isn't a great idea." Yes, that is true. Expressing anger physically is never our goal. It can make the anger worse even. If you're beating something up with a baseball bat, it convinces the body there's a reason to be angry and upset; there's a threat. I want to add actually, before I go onto what you would do instead, you would never make the child express anything. You're not making the child express anger, but you're also not making them express tears. You're encouraging tears, absolutely, because it's healing. But it's not something you can make anyone do. All you can really ever do is create the conditions where the other person feels safe.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:21:39](#) You're supporting them to express emotion. You're not making them feel or express anything. And then I would suggest to them, "You can show me how mad you are. Instead of hitting, you could stomp your foot." That's a redirection. If you have a young child, a three year old, and they're hitting, if they can clap their arms around their body to keep the hands from hitting, but stomp their foot and yell something, that's a huge improvement over hitting. That's a great thing to teach kids to do, right? Throwing their arms around themselves might be enough. You might not have to teach him to stomp his foot. Right? But this isn't just so that they have a chance to express their anger. It's actually a redirection of the anger. It's like if a young child is about to throw, you're not going to necessarily stop the impulse to throw. But you could maybe have them throw at the wall instead of throwing at the baby. Right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:22:43](#) You could just say, "You're so mad. You want to throw that. Throw it over here." Right? And no, you don't really want to encourage throwing, but it's a redirection at this time for a very young child. And remember, it's not just getting out the feeling. It's that they want to show you the anger so that you can acknowledge it.

### Question 5:

Dr. Laura Markham: A parent commented that her three and a half year old, when frustrated or angry, isn't ready to be a part of roughhousing or giggling. She tries to hug and sometimes that helps. And other times, not. You're right. I think maybe I gave the wrong impression because when kids are frustrated or angry, you usually cannot turn it around by making light of it. They could feel discounted like you're not actually getting how upset they are. If they're just mildly annoyed, you can often giggle or get them giggling and be silly to let it out. But if they're really upset and angry, then usually they just need to tell you about it and have you affirm it. Maybe then they need to cry. You don't want to not acknowledge the upset. Right? But you do

want to giggle at other times of the day to empty the backpack. Right? But in the moment, you're doing great. The hug is great. You can just say, "You're so disappointed. I'm sorry this is so hard."

### Question 6:

Dr. Laura Markham:

This parent has a two and a half year old that's having a hard time since his little sister was born. He's only two and a half. You're saying that you're letting them use the iPad so that you can get dinner on the table or get other chores done. I totally understand. With a six month old, they take all your time. But when the six month old naps, your job is to connect with the two and a half year old. You aren't home to get dinner on the table. You aren't home to get the laundry done. You have a partner who's not there, I understand, during the day. But you're home to raise your children. And in this moment, your children need you more than they're getting you, at least your two and a half year old does. That's why he's doing what you're saying, which is he's getting so upset and trying to hit his sister often.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:24:43](#)

If he's trying to hit his sister often, he needs more from you than he's getting. That's more important than getting dinner on the table. I'm serious. You just have to be sort of ruthless about that. Somebody else has to do that job because right now, if he's often trying to hit the baby, that's your job to help him adjust to her. Because if you don't do it now, I'm sorry to tell you this, but things are going to be worse soon when she starts crawling in a few months. That's actually just as hard as the initial period of time when the new baby's born. You need as much laughter and snuggling now as possible. You can expect him to cry daily, but if you can do that, soon, he'll stop hitting her and his anger will start to focus on you instead of her. That's actually a good thing. I know it sounds crazy, but that's a good thing. Much better than when he's just trying to hurt her. Because he'll feel more connected to you, he'll be able to show you his rage towards you, which he can't do right now. And then the next step is he'll get very needy. He'll cry more and be more dependent, and

more whiny and more like a baby. That's when you're about to turn the corner.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:25:49](#)

And then you're going to see him get more resilient, thankfully, just as she starts crawling. And then of course, you'll have that challenge. But I would really encourage you to work on the backpack stuff now and spend the time that you need with him now. When she's awake and you can't just focus on him, you can still sit on the floor with her, either wear her or put her in a chair, and let her watch while you're roughhousing with him and he's laughing. Right now, a six month old is probably content doing a lot of watching, which is fantastic because that's what you need her to do right now while you connect more with her brother.

#### Question 7:

Dr. Laura Markham:

This is a question about a two year old and since the baby was born, he will no longer accept comfort from dad at night, he only wants comfort from mom. And so the question is, "Should mom go in to comfort him?" And I would say yes. I think you're right on the money that he needs reassurance his mother will be there for him and you need to go in. Now, I understand if you're nursing the baby, you can't go in. At that point, the problem is, if you're not going in right away, don't then go in 15 minutes later after he screamed for 15 minutes because you're training him that if he keeps screaming, you'll go in.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:27:01](#)

Either be prepared not to go in at all that night, which is bad because you'll get pushback the next day. Right? If he wakes up and looks for you, and he's upset that you won't come and you don't go at all ... I'm not saying you're leaving him alone to cry. Obviously, your partner is going in. His dad is with him. But he's going to cry, probably scream, for more than 15 minutes. But if you go in at 15 minutes, that's going to just teach him to keep screaming. So, I would say you're not going to go in at all. Gradually, as long as daddy continues to try to soothe him, he's going to get that it's okay. He's going to learn to go back to sleep. But the next day, he's going to be upset and he's

going to wake up more the next night. Anytime you're not meeting his nighttime needs to be reassured by mommy, it's true, you're going to get pushback after that. But you can't always go in if you're nursing the baby. I get it.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:27:51](#)

If it is possible for you to go in at that moment, even with a baby at your breast in one arm, then go ahead and do it. And if you need help from your partner too, take your partner with you and go in and soothe him. You did say that as soon as you go in, he settles right down. So, it might be possible for you to do that. In which case, that's what you do. But he's already showed you he's not going to be reassured if you just ignore him and let your partner deal with him since he knows if he keeps crying, you're going to come in eventually. I want to add, your real goal here is to reassure him of your connection during the day, so he's more secure at night. You need to start with basic preventive maintenance, and also the sibling book. My sibling book is full of ways to do this. That's why I wrote the book. As you use those ideas during the day with him, I think you'll see that he'll wake up less at night.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:28:40](#)

Of course, I don't know how you're putting him to bed. But if you're with him when he falls asleep at night, that's a problem because it means that he will look for you in the night. If dad can be with him when he falls asleep at night, that's a hundred times better. If nobody's with him when he falls asleep at night, if you can get him to that stage, that's even better. But you're not going to do a tough love approach, obviously, with a child who is so worried about whether his parents still love him because there's a new baby in the house.

### Question 8:

Dr. Laura Markham:

This question is from a parent asking about her three and a half year old who says, "Go away" when she's angry, but then she just sucks her thumb in the other room and stuffs the feelings down. This is very common. Those feelings are stuffed for a reason. They don't feel good. So you just say to your child, "You're so upset. You don't even want me here. When I'm close, you feel even more upset, it sounds

like. So, I'm going to move away a little bit." "Go away."  
 "Okay. I hear telling me to go away. I'm going to move back to here. I'm right here when you need a hug." That's all, and you shut your mouth.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:29:49](#)

If she says, "Go away." And yells at you again, you don't even have to say anything. She'll probably then be quiet. Most of the time, what happens is, pretty soon after this, she will come over and touch you or crawl into your lap for a hug, as long as you've explicitly offered that. You can also ask her what to do. But don't ask her at that moment when she's angry. When you ask kids when they're **not** angry, what to do at these moments -- "Those times when you told me to go away, do you actually want me to leave? How far away should I go?" -- They usually tell you not to go away. In fact, that would be your starting place, is that you would have a conversation with her when she's not upset. But generally, stay close, "I'm right here with a hug when you're ready."

#### Question 9:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:30:38](#)

A parent wants to know, "What strategies can you offer for a toddler whining? We want our son to know that his feelings are okay, but the whining is really hard and we don't want to encourage it. It's just too grating." I understand. Whining is grating. I want to point out that any toddler who has a three month old sibling, which this parent does also have a three month old ... Any toddler with a three month old sibling can be forgiven for whining. Of course, they're going to whine. I want to add that this whole question of positively reinforcing, acknowledging feelings, what you're saying is, "Oh honey, you sound like you're having a hard time. You sound like you need help with that." Right? And then you give him the help he needs to solve his problem. If that's not enough and he keeps whining, you invite a scheduled meltdown, right? You're solving the problem of the whining. You're not saying, "Oh, good job for whining."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:31:46](#)

You're saying, "Oh my goodness, you're having a hard time. You're communicating with me. This is a

communication. You're doing the best you can to communicate to me. I get it, and I'm going to respond to that communication by trying to meet your needs in whatever way is possible." I love the question, because I think it helps put into focus the whole question of coaching versus controlling. I think most people are confused about coaching versus controlling. Controlling is using reinforcement, positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement like rewards or punishment, to change the child's behavior. That's what control is. We're trying to change the behavior by manipulating the child one way or the other with positive or negative reinforcement. But it actually doesn't work very well because it assumes that children are like lab rats. But in fact, their behavior is much more complex than that. Lab rats can learn. They're incredibly smart, but they're not as smart as your child.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:32:48](#)

Your child's behavior is determined less by what you do on the outside than by what the child is experiencing on the inside. In your case, your child is feeling that he's not good enough. And the reason I know that is that you went out and got a newer, younger model. Clearly his conclusion would be that he's not good enough. And poor baby, he's trying so hard, but he feels like giving up. How do I know? Because he whines. He feels hopeless. If you're worried about reinforcing his whining, the way to do that is to continue to let him feel like this. Now, I realize you can't control how he feels. But if you address the needs and the feelings driving the whining instead of trying to manipulate his behavior, I think you'll see that he'll do less whining.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:33:41](#)

The need here is to reassure him of your love. Then you need to roughhouse to get him laughing so he doesn't feel so afraid. Connect with him 24/7 with empathy as much as you can. Do special time, so he knows he still has your heart. And when he does show you his hopelessness, his loneliness, his fear, by whining, reassure him that you're there for him and that you love him despite the fact that he's whining and he's not perfect. Now, you don't use those words necessarily, but you show him with your acceptance and your tenderness. I guess I would urge everyone who's listening to not think of your relationship with your child in terms of strategies and behavioral reinforcements, but instead, in terms of relationship.

Right? It's all about the relationship and meeting the kids' needs. Right? Coaching is addressing the needs and feelings driving the behavior. That's what changes the behavior, instead of rewards and punishment.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:34:45](#)

From a coaching lens, our empathy is unconditional love that the child needs. That's what allows them to work through their pain so they can grow. And then of course, their behavior will change.

### Question 10:

A parent is asking for clarification, about when their three year old has a tantrum and they say, "Wow, it looks like you're so mad." She'll scream back at them, "Stop talking!" Which is very common. And they don't want to just say, "Okay, I'm here." Because they think it sounds dismissive. And they don't know how much to label her emotions. Because, in the audio, I say, "Don't go into too much detail with the kid's emotions." But this parent is saying, that when I described that, I did seem to go into quite a bit of detail with my son about what he was feeling.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:35:42](#)

So that's a great clarification. I'm really glad you asked this question. So, when I said don't go into detail, what I was saying was that you don't need to specifically label the emotions. When kids are very upset and we label their emotions, especially saying, "You're very angry." Kids often will say, "I am not angry!" Right? By the way when you say, "Oh sweetheart, you're so upset about this." They don't usually say, "I am not upset about this." Which is interesting. Somehow they've gotten the message that it's not okay to be angry. And they deny that. Sometimes they'll deny that they're sad, of course, or disappointed. But I've never had a kid say, or heard of a child saying, "I'm not upset." Which I think is fascinating. It's okay to be upset. It's not okay to be angry in our culture, apparently.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:36:34](#)

So I think usually upset is a good word to use. Usually the more specific we are in labeling the emotion, the more angry they get at us. But I do think you want to go into detail about the situation, which means you want to

describe what the child is upset about. Right? So, if they're very upset, you may talk less. Because, when kids are very upset, all those words just get in the way. You're asking the child to step out of their limbic system, which is the emotional part of the brain, and into their cortex, which is the thinking part. And when we ask kids to pay attention to what we're saying, they can't really focus on the emotions.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:37:18](#)

But the whole point is to get the emotions out. So our job is to help them feel safe. Not to give them a barrage of words, that won't help them feel safe. Then they just get angrier at us. Right? So, when your child is very upset, you're not going to talk very much. With my son, when I went into detail with him, he wasn't having a meltdown. He might've been saying, "I hate having a sister." But he wasn't crying and screaming and kicking and having an actual meltdown. So, after the meltdown, you might tell the story. Or you might talk the way I spoke to my son in that incident. And you're acknowledging their feelings, but you're also helping them develop emotional intelligence. But when you say, "What do we do during the tantrum?" With your daughter, the important thing to say is that she's safe.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:38:03](#)

So you simply say, "Oh, Sweetie, you didn't want that. Oh, this day isn't going right for you. Nothing's going right." Right? You might say that. And she might yell, "Stop talking!" And you can say, "Okay, no more talking. You're safe. I am right here." That's all you have to say. That's not dismissive. If you say that like you mean it, like there is nothing more important to you than being here with your child. Which, by the way, I have used. I've said that to children. They get that you're there with them and they're safe. There's nothing dismissive about it. I also want to say that often we talk to the child because of our own anxiety. So just breathe and notice your own feelings. You might need to say things to yourself inside your own head to talk yourself down. Right? But don't talk to your child out of your own anxiety, when they're upset.

### **Question 11:**

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:38:55](#) Another parent is also asking for clarification about backpack emptying. Because her 17-month-old, who is still nursing, will be in the middle of a meltdown and will ask to nurse. And she doesn't want to refuse him the comfort, but she doesn't want him to stuff his feelings. So, I get it. My own recommendation on this is to stall for a few minutes and say, "We'll nurse in a minute." But I wouldn't let him get hysterical. I would absolutely allow the nursing after you stall for a few minutes. And I think over time you'll see that he's more able to tolerate longer waits. There are people, Aletha Solter writes about this in *The Aware Baby*. And she says, right from the beginning, you don't want to nurse kids if they're upset. You want to let them cry, then you want to tell them you hear them and really listen, and then you would nurse them.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:39:45](#) I actually don't agree with that. I have great respect for Aletha Solter, but I don't agree with that. Because I think it takes this theory too far. I think that theory should never take precedence over our instinct. And our instinct tells us that nature designed babies to be comforted by nursing. There were not pacifiers. Babies nurse, not just to eat, but for comfort. Babies nurse when they've been in pain. So if nature designed us that way, who are we to stop that from happening? The question is where that change is. And I am not able to figure out where that change is. Is 17 months a good place to stop that?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:40:27](#) I would just say that when a 17-month-old gets hurt, because they fall down and they want to nurse right away, I would say, "Oh no, show me. Ouch, that hurts so much. Let me kiss it." And they're going, "I want to nurse. I want to nurse." And they're tearing at your shirt. I would say, "Oh, we're going to nurse in just a minute. Show me your owie first. Oh, my goodness." You're letting them focus on the owie a little longer and then you nurse them. Right? So I think you can find that balance. I wouldn't worry. But, as your child gets older, I think you'll see more and more that you do need to wait to nurse them. But I wouldn't worry too much, at 17 months, about it. About drawing a clear line.

**Question 12:**

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:41:11](#)

A parent is asking, "What do we do when, as our kid gets bigger, he's three-and-a-half and we do all the things you say. But I'm worried that his emotions are getting bigger as he gets older. And is that taking things too far? And what's going to happen when he's older, like a teenager?" I think we all have this fear that our kids are going to put their hand through a wall when they're a teenager, if they're banging on things now at the age of three. So that's a great question, lots of people worry about it. But remember the brain rewires at age six and again at 12. And we become more able to process emotions verbally. So that's the first thing. Second thing, even at age four-and-a-half, kids are more able to manage emotions verbally if they have had help with emotions so far -- which your child has had. So, remember, it's not just that we allow all emotions so that children are allowed to have meltdowns. It's also that we give kids tools to manage their emotions.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:42:09](#)

So we model stop, drop and breathe. We mention that it's not an emergency, to talk ourselves down and talk them down. So we're actually modeling how to be emotionally intelligent and how to manage emotions. So you can teach kids those things. You can even teach kids direct mindfulness tools. But stop, drop and breathe is the most simple and best one. The big thing, in the end, is that the brain matures and it has the capacity to self calm. And right now it really doesn't have as much of that capacity. And a lot of it comes from the connection with the parents so the child is motivated to do that. My daughter, what people said about her when she was three, "She's a spicy one. I pity you when she's a teenager." And my daughter said to me this week, "I was a challenging child because I hated any kind of limitation. And because I was so hypersensitive, super sensitive to everything, highly sensitive. But, because I was devoted to you, I was actually pretty reasonable."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:43:16](#)

I loved the word devoted, I'd never heard her say that before. I was devoted to you. And I realized, well, she was devoted to me. It was because I was devoted to her. It's all about the connection. I reminded her at the time when we

had this conversation, "Well you became devoted to me. But, when you were three-and-a-half, you were less devoted to me. You became more devoted over time." That word, that beautiful word, devoted. And it was really because I became more able to connect with her despite the fact that she was a difficult child. But it was also because she had that connection with me because I was so devoted to her and allowing her to be who she was. Because of that she was able and motivated to want to connect with me and to want to regulate herself. And I think that's what we have to remember when they're very little is that we're giving them the motivation. So, when they **can** control themselves, they want to.

### Question 13:

- Parent: [00:44:19](#) So I have an almost-two-year-old girl. And when she's having a meltdown, she'll just seem to stop in the middle of it and she won't release all of her built-up emotions. She doesn't really cry. She kind of growls or moans.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:44:43](#) Aww.
- Parent: [00:44:44](#) More than actual crying, just with the upset-ness.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:44:48](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Parent: [00:44:48](#) And then she just suddenly will stop and distract herself with something. She'll see the dog and be like "bah", because that's what she calls the dog. Or she'll point out the window or something.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:45:00](#) Right, she distracts herself.
- Parent: [00:45:00](#) Yeah, but she's not finishing. So then I don't know how to help her release all the rest of it. Because I know that she's got emotions in there and there's adrenaline and all this stuff happening. She's exhausted. Napping and teething stinks.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:45:15](#) Yeah.

- Parent: [00:45:15](#) But how do I get the rest of it out? Because I know it's still there. I'm like, "No, no, no, come back." Like, "We were doing something."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:45:27](#) So, you can't control what somebody else feels or even expresses. But you can set up the environmental conditions that would increase the likelihood that she'll be able to do this.
- Parent: [00:45:40](#) Okay.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:45:40](#) First of all, if she's done... And there are people, kids and probably adults who when they're done they just sit up and they're done. I mean, there are some kids who they're crying and sobbing and then they're looking into your eyes and stroking your face and saying, "I love you mommy. Do you still love me?" There are those kids. And they're really cooperative for the rest of the day. Then there are the kids who are crying and sobbing in your arms, or maybe on the floor and won't let you touch them, and they sit up and they go, "Where's daddy? Let's go find daddy."
- Parent: [00:46:10](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:46:11](#) And you don't know if they did actually worked it through or not. Right?
- Parent: [00:46:14](#) Right.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:46:15](#) And, sometimes, they did work it through. You say, "Oh, well, he's in the other room. Are you done crying?" "Yep, I'm done." Or, "Where's daddy?"
- Parent: [00:46:23](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:46:25](#) "I'm going to daddy." They don't want to even talk about the fact that they cried, and they're out of the room. And you go, "Okay." And you go in the other room. And, for the rest of the day, they're great. And you're like, "Oh, I guess it really worked for them." Or maybe even later in the day, like at bedtime they'll say to you... If you say, "Let's talk about our day. What was your favorite thing? What happened today?" And you say, "And then there was the time you were really crying. You cried so hard. And then

you wanted to go see daddy. But then it seemed like you felt better. Did you feel better after?" And they're like, "I was mad, but then I felt better." And they do acknowledge it in retrospect, some of those kids, when they get a little more verbal than your daughter.

- Parent: [00:46:58](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:46:58](#) But sometimes they go find daddy or the bird or the dog and they're **not** better.
- Parent: [00:47:05](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:05](#) Right? Everything that happens sets them off.
- Parent: [00:47:07](#) Even several hours later, yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:09](#) Yeah. And so, if that's what's happening with her, then something else will set her off. And so, if that's the case and she does that over and over again, then she does really need to cry. And she's not crying, she's just moaning. Does she ever cry?
- Parent: [00:47:22](#) It's more whining than crying.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:24](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Parent: [00:47:24](#) Like I said, it's growling.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:24](#) Oh.
- Parent: [00:47:24](#) Like a fake crying. Yeah, it's quite cute and pathetic at the same time. But, yeah, it's never really a full on, "I'm really, genuinely upset."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:39](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Parent: [00:47:40](#) I mean, she's a really good kid. And I know it's every time she didn't take a good nap that day or she woke up really early that morning.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:49](#) Yeah.

- Parent: [00:47:49](#) But it's teething and everything else. When she doesn't sleep she becomes a totally different kid.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:57](#) Of course.
- Parent: [00:47:57](#) But, yeah, it will be like 20 minutes later, an hour later and she's back to square one. And I'm just like, "See, you weren't finished."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:48:03](#) So here's the thing. I think you can just, at that point, try to increase safety. Can you get her laughing at those times?
- Parent: [00:48:16](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:48:16](#) If you can get her laughing, that will actually help her to be more likely to cry when she does have the meltdown.
- Parent: [00:48:24](#) Okay, that sounds good.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:48:25](#) But it sounds like she's generally fine, except when she's tired.
- Parent: [00:48:29](#) Yes, she really is.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:48:29](#) Or teething.
- Parent: [00:48:30](#) And it's funny because we started this class and this was my life three months ago and then everything's been great. And then I was like, "No, we're still going to do it." To my husband, because I wanted him to be a part of it. Because I'm sure we'll have other bumps down the road. And then, it's funny, it was literally earlier this week more teeth are coming through and sleep went out the window and she's back to-
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:48:49](#) Back to this, yeah.
- Parent: [00:48:52](#) I'm like, "Oh, here it is. We're here again." So, yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:48:55](#) Yeah.
- Parent: [00:48:56](#) Yeah, it totally is triggered by sleep and not having enough of it.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:49:04](#) Yeah.
- Parent: [00:49:05](#) But, yeah, we do the laughing thing. Trying to tickle her to giggle. I tried to get scheduled giggle time in so she can release it. Because I did read, from you, that that was helpful.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:49:15](#) Great. Okay. I would say as much laughter as possible at those times when she doesn't seem to finish. And all you can really do is, the next time she seems like she's going to fall apart, is just make that as safe as possible for her. And, when she does moan and growl to say, "Oh Sweetie, I'm sorry. You're having such a hard time. I'm right here. You're safe." And, really, that's it.

#### Question 14:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:49:40](#) And the next question is, again, about empathy. And, in this question, the parent is saying that her son, who is three-and-a-half, resists the empathy. When she says, "Oh, I'm sorry you're mad Sweetie." Or, "You are so frustrated." Or, "You really don't want to brush your teeth, do you?" Which, if you say it in that tone of voice, those are great things to be saying. His response is to yell at her, "No, I don't even care about brushing my teeth!" Or, "I'm not frustrated!" And that's okay. He's basically saying, "I'm so mad at you that I don't want you to relate to my feelings." Because here's what's going on. If you do that, if you say it in the tone of voice that I just did, you're disarming his anger. He wants to hang on to that anger because you know what's under the anger? Pain. Like, "Oh, my goodness. Once again, I have to brush my teeth and go off to Siberia by myself in my bed." Or, "I'm really mad because mom and dad are making me stop playing and clean up my toys or go with them to the grocery store." Whatever it is that he's mad about.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:50:48](#) And so, when a child resists your empathy, what they're really saying is, "I would rather be mad and attack you than feel this feeling that's under the anger." Remember, anger is a secondary emotion. It's a response. It's the body's fight or flight response to being under threat. And

the threat is, you're making him clean up his toys or go to the supermarket with you or brush his teeth. And he doesn't want to. And he doesn't want to feel those awful feelings of how awful it feels to feel so powerless and like somebody else runs his life. And he can't even decide when he wants to do what he wants to do. Those are bad feelings. None of us would like them. And so he's saying, "I don't want to feel those feelings." And when you empathize, it makes it worse. So I would just urge you, as the parent, to remember that the fact that he doesn't like the feelings doesn't mean you shouldn't empathize. It doesn't mean he shouldn't feel those feelings. Right? And when he says to you, "No, I don't even care about brushing my teeth!" You can say, "Okay, I hear you Sweetie. I'm so sorry."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:51:56](#)

So at that point he may yell, "You're not sorry! You're making me brush my teeth!" And that's fine, if that's what he does. But basically your response, you can just stop talking. But your response is, "I know, Sweetie. It's awful. It's hard to feel like somebody else is telling you what to do." If you can speak to the underlying feeling, that's great. And if he says, "Don't you say that!" Then just stop, just stop talking. All you have to do is see it from his perspective. If you really thought from your child's perspective, it would move you to tears most of the time. I'm going to say that again. We think we're empathizing when we say the words. But the truth is, underneath the words, there's this big feeling. And if we really saw it from the child's perspective, most of the time we would cry. And if you actually get to the point where you see it from your child's perspective, you'll transmit that compassion without even opening your mouth. So you don't have to actually be explicit about it. You don't have to put a label on what your child is feeling. Simply notice the feelings, see it from your child's perspective, feel it with them. And hold your limit. And your child may begin to cry because they're actually feeling it, too. We're very deeply connected to our kids and, when they feel something and we join them there, we're bonding with them even beyond words. So much of our relationship with our children happens in the right brain, beyond the level of words, at a very deep level of connection. And so don't worry about the words, just connect.

**Question 15:**

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:53:43](#)

“When my 14-month-old is upset, how hard do I try to soothe him versus teaching him it's okay to be upset? So I think you always soothe a child of any age. Your attitude is that his tears are welcome. You understand why he's upset. That attitude is communicating that it's okay to be upset. You're not distracting him from the feelings. Right? If you're distracting him, you're communicating that it's **not** okay to be upset. But I don't see any difference between soothing him and teaching him it's okay to be upset. So you're saying, "Oh my, that must have hurt." You're acknowledging his upset. Right? But you're still soothing him. You're not going to let him cry without your holding him. Right? So I'm hoping, that makes it more clear.

**Question 16:**

Dr. Laura Markham:

A parent asks, "Sometimes my three-year-old's bad moods appear during what looks like a happy moment. Could those shifting moods be related to the fact that, after her birth, I had some slight postpartum anxiety?" Well, so I would say if you had a hard time after your child's birth it is certainly possible that that was hard for your baby. They do pick up on our anxiety and it might make her a little more on the anxious end of the spectrum. And yes, that could therefore account for her tendency to have a full emotional backpack. When we're more anxious, we tend to have more of a full emotional backpack. On the other hand, any three-year-old who has a 10-month-old brother, which is your situation, might be struggling. So I would not assume that's the reason, unless she's always been that way. And, one other thing, I don't really see this as just shifting moods. It's very common for children to have a happy moment with you and they like how that feels and they feel safe with you. So they respond to it and their body brings up all those yucky feelings they've been carrying around. So, in those happy moments, they end up responding by falling apart. So if that's what's happening

with your daughter, I would say congratulate yourself on how well you're creating safety during those happy moments. She falls apart, that's a good thing.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:55:49](#)

And I want to say one other thing, because you said you were a perfectionist. You do not have to worry that your postpartum anxiety hurt your daughter. Yes, it's entirely possible it had an effect on her. And, if that's the case, she's acting it out now. So you have the opportunity to make it up to her so she can work it through. Just let that awareness give you extra motivation that, when she has a hard time, stay patient, stay compassionate. Look at it as paying your dues for the past when you weren't able to fully be present with her. And that will help her heal. You do not have to beat yourself up about this. If your child was hurt by something early, they will always show you in the present. And you can always heal it now. Let yourself off the hook. That goes for you, of course, but it also goes for everybody else who's worried about the past.

#### Question 17:

Parent: [00:56:46](#)

So I want to ask you about this one time where my three-year-old messed up his hair in anger. He did it in a moment of rage when he couldn't get his pants on after bath time. And then he grabbed his hair after I had spiked it after bath at his request. And then he immediately cried after he messed it up and asked me to fix it. It clearly made him distraught that he messed up his own hair when he got so angry. It's as if he did it to punish himself out of frustration for his pants. Is that what's happening with him? He has a lot of anger issues. I was just wondering if there's any clue there.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:57:22](#)

I think that's exactly what happened. And it's such a heartbreaking example of how all of us sometimes, when we get mad, self-sabotage. We get so angry. And he was angry, in this case, about not getting his pants on. So he was actually angry at himself and he took it out on himself. And he deprived himself of something. And I think it's just so heartrending because it's what we all can do at times. And wouldn't it be great if we had the awareness not to do

that? To notice. To stop, drop, and breathe. But you know what? He's three. And so he's going to do that, because he's only three. I would say if he does get angry often, then he's a kid with big feelings. Remember from this course that anger is a defense. It's to keep us from feeling something more vulnerable.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:58:15](#)

So the more vulnerable feeling, in this case, is, "I'm three years old. I took my bath. My mother fixed my hair. I'm trying to put on my pants and I can't get them on properly. I'm failing at this." And the vulnerability of not being able to get on your own pants, when he's trying so hard, made him feel inadequate, not good enough. And he couldn't bear that feeling so he lashed out. In fact, he lashed out at himself to punish himself. And so the more we can help kids to be willing to feel those more vulnerable feelings, the fear of not being good enough, the sense of inadequacy that just makes us all feel awful. And there's even shame often attached to that, that we're not good enough. And so the more we can make it safe for kids to feel those feelings, the less they have to go into anger. But I'm not saying you made him feel unsafe and you made him go into anger. I think it's a normal human reaction. We see two year olds do this, where they just don't want to feel upset and so they lash out.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:59:20](#)

So I would say that it will help for him to know he doesn't have to be perfect. That's a really important thing to talk about a lot, how no one's perfect. And it would help him a lot to know that some things are really hard, most things worth doing are really hard. And that's okay, he can do hard things. And the first time you do something, you're never good at it, but you keep working at it and you get better. And, "Why, when you were a baby you couldn't even roll over. And now look at you. You can put on your hat yourself. Sometimes it's hard to get on your pants because you're still learning, it takes practice, but you're even learning that!" So just to make it normal for our children that things that are hard are okay. Feeling inadequate as we tackle those things is part of the process. That's how we build resilience in kids so that they're able to overcome obstacles to accomplish their goals in life. Does that help?

- Parent: [01:00:21](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:00:22](#) Good. I'm glad. I love that you spike his hair at his request after his bath. That is lovely.

### Question 18:

- Dr. Laura Markham: A parent is talking about her three year old who's angry and rigid. He does selective baby talk when he's not happy. "He's always been sensitive, but his behavior reached new lows when his father left us earlier this year. And he's worse after school or after being with his dad." So, you can't keep him from going to his dad's and you can expect him to come home with a full backpack because that's what happens when kids have to go back and forth between the two houses. It does sound like school is hard for him and I wonder if there's anything you could do about that. He is only three. Maybe there's a way to make school easier for him, help him to connect more to the teacher? You also mentioned that you've only seen a small improvement in him during this course. So I realize that he's had to deal with his father's absence, but it sounds like that preceded the course? I also hear you're a single mom, you have three kids, so it might be very hard to fit everything in. But it would do your son a world of good to roughhouse and laugh. He needs to do that.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:01:28](#) I wonder if there's a way that, when the kids go to their dad's, that you could keep one kid back. I know that's the only time you have off, so I don't think you should do it every time. But maybe there can be some special times where you keep one of the other kids with you. Of course, if you kept the five-year-old, it might be harder for your three-year-old and one-year-old to go. I don't know how that works. But it does occur to me that it would give you time alone with him, which would be great. I just think he's rigid, he's angry, he's trying to keep pain down. He reverts to baby talk because he feels overwhelmed with

what's being asked of him. So he's having to go back and forth between houses and that's hard. So what he needs is to cry. And that means you need to get him laughing uproariously every single day for 20 minutes. Because that's going to move him toward crying.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:02:16](#)

I'm also going to recommend to you that you schedule a few sessions with a parenting coach just to be sure you're doing everything you can with the Aha Parenting tools to help him laugh and cry. And, if it turns out that you've gone as far as you can with that, then the coach can help you figure out how to find a counselor who you should go to with your son. Because I don't think you should wait. I think if he's that rigid and angry right now that you need to intervene. I think you have the tools from this course to handle it. But you may not have the internal resources because you're a single mom with three kids and I think a coach could really help you. But you may also just not have the time. But I have heard from other parents that these tools are as effective as anything they do with a counselor. So I would say find a coach to hold your hand and help you through it, and help you schedule, and that will probably be your most effective bet.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:03:15](#)

If you are thinking about a coach, they're on the Aha! Parenting website. You can go to the about section, in the menu bar at the top, and you'll find the coaching page. I unfortunately can't take new clients, but I have trained some really good coaches. And they're on that page. You can go through and see who looks like they'd be a good fit for you. And they all work through Skype as well as in person. So you don't even have to worry about geography.

### Question 19:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:03:46](#)

Our next question is from a parent who says her two-and-a-half-year-old son has an automatic “no” response. And when he's off, as they say, he wakes up angry and yelling “No!” at everything. So that's interesting, that he wakes up that way, because that to me, says that there's something going on. Either he's being awakened before he's in the right place in terms of his sleep stages. Sometimes kids get

awakened by traffic noise or by light and they're really not ready to wake up. Or maybe he's not getting enough sleep? I mean, if you're waking him up that would actually be a cause of this. So I would say be really sure he's getting enough sleep and that he's not being awakened before he's ready to in his sleep cycles. That's important. The parent continues on, to say that she does her best to empathize and connect and distract, but basically they're walking on eggshells until he has a tantrum or a few tantrums. And, otherwise, this will go on for days unless he does that. And he must have a full backpack, but they don't know what's filling it or maybe they can't empty it enough. And he does have high sensory needs. And she says, "Once he blows, it's ongoing. He'll cry and want hugs and then two minutes later he'll get angry again."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:05:03](#)

So, that crying and wanting hugs is great. But, yeah, he's not done emptying the backpack. So you're right. I totally agree with your diagnosis that this is a full backpack. And kids with high sensory needs are going to have a more full backpack more often than other children. And that means that they need to cry more and laugh more. And you don't have to worry about what's filling it. It's probably just his overwhelm from his sensory issues. And the way you empty that is daily laughter and daily tears. So you did mention that you've been told to ignore his upset when possible, but it always escalates. I guarantee you that ignoring his upsets will fill his backpack. Because he feels already dysregulated. And then, when you ignore his upsets, he gets more dysregulated because he doesn't feel safe. He doesn't feel like he has backup or any help from you. And I know, by the way, that conventional advice is to ignore kids' emotions. I don't know why people think that's a good idea, but they do. I know that's conventional advice and it doesn't work. I mean, think about it. If you were upset about something and everyone around you ignored you, you would raise your voice. And so it always will escalate. The person just has to get their message across by yelling louder.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:06:17](#)

So the way to calm the storm is always to listen and to empathize so he can stop shouting at you. So you say that this goes on for days until he has a tantrum. So don't wait, schedule the meltdown, just do it. When he's having a

hard time, welcome those feelings. And, of course, for the meltdown to be effective he has to get past the anger to the tears and fears underneath it. And it sounds like he'll do that, but then he goes back into the anger. It often seems to cycle through. The way I talk about it is, I usually say that kids often start with anger. But then, when you're very compassionate, they feel safer and they begin to cry. And then they get it all out and they feel better. But the reality is that many children start to cry and then the feelings swamp them and they feel overwhelmed and they go right back into anger. And then you have to pull out your compassion and safety again. And then they start to cry again and they want a hug. And then they go into anger again. So you've seen that happens with him, that's okay. That's what's going to happen.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:07:16](#)

And so your job is just, in the moment, to be as compassionate as possible. And you also need to do preventive maintenance all the time with him. He needs special time. He needs laughter twice a day, 15 minutes each time, and roughhousing. He needs just constant acknowledgement of how he feels, what I call 24/7 empathy. These tools, when you really use them, do not fail. And it may be because he has high sensory needs, that he will still be a handful. He may be challenging. He's not just being challenging to you, though. It's challenging to him to manage all that input into his sensory system. And you know what? That's okay. He needs you to help him with that and even to talk about what's hard for him. So that he hears from you, "Oh Sweetheart, it's so hard when you need quiet and the noises are so loud. And they really hurt your ears, don't they?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:08:27](#)

Because we just have to understand that a kid who has sensory challenges, they perceive differently than we do. And we have to realize we can't quite imagine what that would feel like, but it is a lot for him. So your acknowledgement will be of enormous help to him. And remember he's only two-and-a-half. This is going to get better and better as long as you are showing up for him and summoning up all your calm and your compassion. And helping him to actually cry as soon as he starts to have a hard time, instead of going through days of trying to fend off the storm.

**Question 20:**Dr. Laura Markham: [01:09:05](#)

A parent is saying that, "When my child is having a meltdown, he runs to his bed and wants his cuddly toy. He still seems able to let out his emotions, but you've said that children try to distract themselves. Is it okay to let him have his cuddly toy?" You know what? As long as he is able to let out his emotions and cry, it's fine. It's increasing his sense of safety. So that is totally fine. And I think we don't want to withhold from children the things that help them calm down. When children are in the middle of a meltdown and they are trying to stop the meltdown by going to find daddy or get a drink of water I would probably say, "You know what? We'll find daddy in just a minute. We'll get water in just a minute. It's okay, Sweetie, you're safe. I'm right here. We're just feeling these feelings and they're going to be gone soon." But it's also fine if he says, "Nope, I'm not doing this. I'm going to get daddy. I'm going to get a drink of water," because the feelings will come up again later, right? At some other point. And you'll get a sense with your child about how to manage those meltdowns. Basically, we want kids to learn how to calm themselves down. We also want kids to not be afraid of their emotions, and part of that is going through them in a meltdown with us while we're there, loving them through it and they feel safe.

**Question 21:**Dr. Laura Markham: [01:10:28](#)

A parent is asking about her three year old, who's highly sensitive, and in the last two months since the course began and also preschool began, her behavior has gotten negative, defiant, pushing friends, pushing her parents. "Each time now when I acknowledge her feelings. Or when she doesn't like something, she has a meltdown and says, 'I'm tired.' How can I create more safety for her?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:10:52](#)

So, we don't really know what's going on. You say, "Is this just backpack emptying or deeper anxiety surfacing?" Well, backpack emptying **is** deeper anxiety surfacing

because anxiety is just fear, right? So what's in the backpack is often fear. Fear and grief really are what I find in the backpack and everything else seems to be a variation on that. Disappointment is a kind of grief and feeling powerless is a kind of fear.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:11:22](#)

We don't know if these are old issues stuffed in the backpack, and now that you've been doing the course and your behaviors changed since you started the course, she now feels safe enough to show you. That's entirely possible. It's possible that that's not the case, that this is just overwhelm since she started preschool. But it really doesn't matter because either way the result is the same. She needs to laugh, she needs to cry, she needs to move through these feelings. So having more meltdowns is good if she's crying. And the way you create more safety is with compassion.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:11:53](#)

This is for everybody listening. When your child is having a meltdown or is upset, and you really move into compassion ... Compassion is sitting with someone suffering, being present, fully present with their suffering. So if you're really present when your child is suffering, you will get tears in your eyes because you'll see how hard this is for this beautiful little person who's struggling with these feelings that are so big. And having those tears in your eyes means you're able to really be there, be present with her, and that makes it safe for her.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:12:29](#)

And you would not say many words. You might echo whatever she says. You might even take it a step further depending on how upset she is. If she's going ballistic, you're not going to use very many words. But if she just says, "I'm tired. No, I don't want to do this," like you've asked her to do something, you can just take that as, "Okay, she's telling me she's overwhelmed." So you might say to her, "Oh, you're so tired, Sweetheart. Let me give you a hug. It's hard to be tired. Sometimes I feel that way, too. You must feel so overwhelmed. You really don't want to do this right now. Do you? I hear you. This just feels too hard, huh?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:13:07](#)

By the way, a kid who's just started preschool might well feel overwhelmed and really have a hard time doing

anything like picking up her toys. And that doesn't mean that you wouldn't expect her to pick up her toys, but I would do it at a time when she's feeling good, not tired at the end of the evening. And I would really do a tremendous amount of support. Remember, if you're not using punishment, the way you get your child to do what you want is always support. So you look at it, and EITHER -- there's no amount of support that will be enough for her to pick up her toys, for instance -- OR you CAN figure out some kind of support to give her, that will allow her to rise to the occasion and do what you're asking, like pick up her toys.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:13:52](#)

So you said, "If I acknowledge her feelings every time, then I'm intensifying the sensitivity versus being humorous. How do I balance making light but not distracting from the emotion?" Well, it's true that acknowledging an emotion helps the other person to feel it more strongly. If you need to cry and somebody's tender to you, you're going to burst into tears, right? But that's exactly what we need, to feel the emotion, to process it. That's always your goal to make it safe for her to feel her emotion, so acknowledging it is always what you want to do.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:14:25](#)

I know I talk about how humor helps kids cooperate, and it's great to be humorous if your child is not particularly upset at that moment. If she's sort of mildly annoyed, if she's just digging in her heels and saying, "No, I'm not going to pick up my toys," then you can be humorous about and say, "You're not going to pick up your toys? Really? Not even if we are robots and we pick them up together and we put them on the shelf like this?" Or whatever you can do that's going to get her laughing at that moment. Then she might go along with you because she might smile and decide actually she will do what you're asking.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:14:59](#)

But if you do that, try to be humorous, and as she starts to fall apart, "No, no, I can't clean up the toys," then you don't want to be humorous at that point, because you're invalidating the way she feels. So at that point, you go back to your nurturing self and you say, "Oh Sweetie, I was trying to be funny and have fun, but that didn't help at all, did it? That isn't what you needed. You just needed me to

hug you and understand that you're feeling so tired and overwhelmed right now, right? Maybe you had a hard day at preschool. What happened today?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:15:36](#)

Maybe she can tell you; maybe she can't, and it doesn't really matter. Sometimes after that nurturing interaction, the child is able to actually shift gears and they've sort of gotten their cup filled and they're okay again. But sometimes you have to come back to the toys later or even do it for her. It's not the end of the world. It doesn't mean she'll never learn to clean up her toys. Starting preschool can really wear them out. And by the way, this is also true for kids who start kindergarten. Those are the kids I see the most discombobulated at the end of the day, the kids who've started kindergarten who've not been used to a full day like that.

#### Question 22:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:16:14](#)

A parent is asking, "Having not come from a positive parenting background, we both find it difficult to identify our own emotions and our kids' emotions, so it's hard to empathize without fully understanding what's going on with them. How do we help them feel understood and connected to us?" And her kids are three and a half and two.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:16:31](#)

This is a great question. How wonderful that you know that this is an area you can work on. So I would look at this as a project, like a family project, identifying emotions and talking about them and building emotional intelligence. Go to the part of my website where there are books on helping kids with emotions, and one book that is great for this is the book *Feelings* by Alike, but there are many, many books that you can read and your kids are still at an age where you can get your hands on used books from Amazon or something that doesn't cost much and read a lot about feelings.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:17:11](#)

For you and your partner, I would also suggest Becky Bailey's workbook. It's called *Managing Emotional Mayhem*. She may have other workbooks and she has a lot

of books, but this book, *Managing Emotional Mayhem*, is specifically for parents to learn about emotions and to learn about their kids' emotions and their own emotions and self-regulation. And she does a lot in that workbook. She's wonderful in general. She does an approach very similar to mine. She works in schools mostly, but this book is for teachers or for parents and she does a lot with faces, with facial expressions.

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

And so one Becky Bailey thing is, when you're talking to your child, just to make an expression like they're making. She says this is a way that you can teach kids to understand their own emotions and other people's emotions. You say, "Your face looks like this," and you do what their face is doing, which might be sad or worried or scrunched up or angry, and then you say, "It looks like maybe you're feeling mad or it looks like maybe you're feeling sad." That helps you and it helps your child. And your child might say, "I'm not mad," which they might be mad, but often your child will say, "I am sad," or if they feel safe enough, they might actually tell you what they're feeling.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:18:34](#)

You don't need to know exactly what they're feeling to express empathy and compassion. And so you could just say, "You look upset," which is a great catchall term, and most people don't say, "I'm not upset," or you could just describe their behavior. So your kid doesn't want to get in the bath, and you can say, "You're saying, 'No, no bath!'" I guess you don't want a bath right now. You must be having a great time playing and you don't feel ready for a bath yet. Is that right?" So describe behavior. Describe their face and ask. And often, they'll set you straight. But make it a family project and you'll be learning at the same time as you're teaching your children, which is a wonderful thing.

### Question 23:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:19:19](#)

A parent is asking, "Are all meltdowns emptying the backpack? This weekend, my daughter spent an hour and a half crying next to me in bed as I tried to get her down

for her nap." Oh, that must've been really hard. "I wondered if this was a need to empty her emotions, or she was simply really mad about the nap and overtired."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:19:36](#)

That's a great question that many people have about tiredness and the backpack. Let me start by saying some crying will often be about the event in that moment, right? If a child is hungry or in pain or somebody just took their toy or they don't want to take a nap, that's not about pent up old emotions. That's about the immediate offense, the immediate source of the upset. And so yes, when she doesn't want to nap and she wants to protest that, she's going to cry, of course.

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

But here's a really interesting thing. When kids are tired, they could just go to sleep, right? And sometimes they do. Babies and toddlers and other children, they will just go to sleep when they're tired. We think kids get cranky when they're tired, and that's true, but it's not exactly that equation. Here's what's really happening. When we're tired, our executive function can't work as well. The ego strength is worn down so it doesn't work as well to manage our emotions, so the pent up feelings in the backpack come up or a reaction to what's happening in the moment, right? Something annoying is super annoying. And we all notice when we're tired something that we would normally take in stride suddenly really is a setback to us. It could be something from the backpack or it could be something happening at that moment. But it's because we're tired that we can't quite cope and the ego strength is gone and the old feelings do bubble up from the backpack.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:21:05](#)

I guess in this question, the real issue is, did your daughter need the nap? I don't know how old she is, but if she needed a nap and you set a limit and said, "Sorry Sweetie, it's nap time," and you empathized with how she didn't want to take a nap but you insisted on the nap and she protested it, it's true that she might've been more upset than she would have been if she wasn't tired, but she still needed the nap. You still needed to set the limit and insist on the nap, right? Sometimes we set limits and even though our child really hates our limit, we stick to that limit because we know that's what's best for them. And it

might be that she had feelings in her backpack that she took the opportunity to cry about when she wasn't getting what she wanted. But either way, that wouldn't hurt her. Either way, what happened was she got a nap she needed, and maybe she also got feelings out that she was carrying around her backpack, and I imagine she woke up happy. Either way, it doesn't really matter, I think, whether those are old feelings or a new reaction to a new outrage.

#### Question 24:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:22:04](#)

A parent is asking, "At what age would you start using a scheduled meltdown? Is two years old too young?" No. First of all, just to review, a scheduled meltdown is simply welcoming those emotions. It's that we often are just too busy to really welcome our child's emotions with full compassion and attend to them because we've got to get dinner on the table, we have other children around, whatever. When you do a scheduled meltdown, you're simply finding a time when you can completely attend to your child and you're welcoming those emotions that they're struggling with, right? Anytime a child at any age is having a hard time, you want to welcome those emotions if you can. And if it's a matter of just setting aside the time, then great, that's what you do.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:22:49](#)

I want to add that you would always try to solve the problem if possible. So the offshoot of this question could be, "Well, is a one-year-old too young?" I want to say, we don't really know what a baby needs when they're crying. Obviously, you're not going to take a baby's crying and say, "Oh, I hear you crying. Don't worry. I'm right here with you. I'm fully present. You can have your meltdown," because maybe the baby's hungry and you could solve the problem by feeding her, right? You don't just hold the child who's crying when you haven't tried to solve the problem.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:23:22](#)

If you have a child who's upset and no matter what you do to try to address that upset and meet the child's needs, the child is still upset and angry, they might well need to cry, and it's fine. They're going to get more and more provocative, usually. Usually what happens is they'll look

right at you and throw their cup across the room or yell, "No," in your face or smack you. Two-year-olds will do that. And at that point, you know they're actually trying to provoke some sort of response, and what you do at that point is you set a limit. "No Sweetheart, no more cup. You threw the cup. No more cup."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:24:03](#)

That's a scheduled meltdown. You've set a limit that's a normal limit to set. The kid might be saying, "I need a different cup," and then you would say, "We're not going to get a different cup right now, sweetie. We'll get one soon. Right now we're not going to get a different cup," and then you would talk about what they're upset about, which might, in this case, not really be the cup, but you don't know, so you just say, "I know you really want the different cup. We'll get the different cup soon," and your child goes, "I need a different cup." And you say, "I know, I know. You're going to have the other cup soon. You wish you could have that other cup. It's so hard when you want something you can't have." And that's a scheduled meltdown, right? There's no reason you couldn't do that with a two-year-old.

#### Question 25:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:24:49](#)

A parent says that she knows her kids are unloading their backpacks, but she feels like they're more aggressive lately. And you're right. They are going to be more aggressive, because remember, it's always going to start as a fight. Your job is to disarm the aggression. And I say, seven times out of 10, the aggression can be disarmed by you shifting into compassion and not fighting back and not correcting at that moment, but simply acknowledging the child's perspective.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:25:18](#)

So this parent's real question is, "The older two think I'm not disciplining the two-year-old since I'm not doing timeout anymore, but he's more aggressive, not less, so what am I going to do? I don't want to encourage bad behavior." It sounds like from your question, this is mostly the younger one being aggressive. Most two-year-olds are going to let out the upset they have pretty quickly because

they have less developed brains. So as soon as they feel safe, the old tears and fears are going to come out and they'll release them and their behavior becomes more positive. That's why when you begin peaceful parenting, younger children shift faster. But if they're not, one thing to consider is if they had early stress, early medical trauma, a difficult birth, maybe an older sibling terrorizing them.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:26:04](#)

If your child is being aggressive, it's about fear usually, and you want to notice what's making them afraid. It may be that's what's going on for your two-year-old. There's some old trauma and he needs to cry and empty his backpack. But it's also entirely possible this is not about a backpack emptying situation. You've removed timeouts, but maybe the two-year-old isn't motivated to behave because the only reason he was behaving was because of the timeouts. So maybe he needs more motivation to behave. That means you need to connect with him. So, I would put connection at the top of your list. That is why children behave, connection.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:26:51](#)

I also think a toddler's still learning how to regulate and they have a hard time doing it. And so you do need to teach the toddler that hurting is not okay, so try to prevent the hurting of your other children, obviously. But once he hurts your other child, you don't just let him go on with business as usual. You have to prevent more aggression and keep the other kids safe. It's in the same way that if he were throwing sand in the sandbox, you'd take him out of the sandbox, right? You're not punishing him -- like you wouldn't punish him for throwing the sand -- but you're not letting him have full access to the other children where he could also be hurting them, right? So if he hurts the siblings, he now has to stay with you. If you think he just needs to cry because he's in a bad mood, that's great. Do a scheduled meltdown. If not, if it's just that he was being overly exuberant or just trying to get his way and bully them, which is very common for a two-year-old, then take him with you. If you're cleaning up the kitchen and you need to keep him with you in the kitchen and you put up the safety gate to keep him in the kitchen with you, that's what you do. And of course he won't like it and of course he might have a meltdown, and that's a good thing,

right? And he gets those feelings out, but he is old enough at two to know that when he's aggressive, he can't just play with the other kids. So I think that's the lesson that he needs to be taught.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:28:11](#)

I do want to stress that just because we're not punishing doesn't mean we're not setting limits, right? In conventional parenting, we don't know what to do for prevention and we don't help kids with emotions. But when they misbehave, we punish them, and we think that's setting limits, but it's not. That's punishment. Setting limits is, "I'm not going to let you do more of this. Until I'm confident you won't do it, you have to stay with me or we have to help you with your emotions," or whatever. We're going to do prevention, in other words.

#### Question 26:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:28:43](#)

A parent is asking about her three-year-old hitting. She says, "If I stand up and move away from him, he'll follow me. If I leave the room, he'll follow me and maybe start throwing things. I can't hold him down because he gets super upset because he's trapped." Which, who can blame him? That's understandable. "I tried telling him, 'Ouch, you hurt me,' as you suggested, but he laughed."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:29:01](#)

So actually, in the last question you asked me, the way you phrased it was that he was hitting you out of nowhere, like maybe boredom you said. In that case, he's not following you in a rage. That's a different thing. If he's suddenly going into rage out of nowhere, that's really interesting. What I told you when he would just hit you out of boredom was that you communicate to him that you hear he's trying to tell you something. You're trying to hear the message.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:29:25](#)

Here's what I said to you. You describe what happened. "We were having such a nice time snuggling and then you hit me. Ouch. What are you telling me? Are you mad?" Right? And you actually can have a conversation. And I suggested a whole game with stuffed animals. But in this new question, it's a different scenario. You're saying he's

enraged. He's following you, hitting you. Basically, you move away and you say, "You're so mad you want to hit me. Honey, hitting hurts. No hitting. You can tell me in words you're mad," and that's not going to help him. He's still probably going to keep hitting you, right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:30:01](#)

He's only three, so you can probably move away. And if he keeps hitting you, you hold him with his back to you. Pull him to you. Turn his back to you so he can't hit you. Stay as calm as possible. Be the safe container for his upset. You said he's going to get upset if you hold him down. I would never hold a child down. There's something about being held down that triggers people's basic vulnerability. Being held with their back to you is a whole different thing because they're connected to you at the same time and they can push against your hands, which is very helpful to them.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:30:30](#)

I mentioned what a child's terror will look like when it comes out. It looks like they're scrambling for safety, and often pushing against our hands is really helpful to them. And if he does get upset that you're holding him, you can say, "I hear how upset you are, sweetheart. I'm going to let you go as soon as you can stop hitting me." And he will say, "I'll stop hitting," and you're going to let him go and then he'll hit you again. So you're going to have to do that probably over and over again. Stay as calm as you can. Expect it. Don't get mad. He probably will at some point start crying.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:31:05](#)

I think what you're describing is a kid who is hitting you out of nowhere because he actually needs to cry and he's being provocative. And the fact that it comes in these tender moments when you've been reading to him or something is indicative of that, as well. Remember that if this is a full backpack, which is what I'm describing, you need to get him laughing a minimum of 15 minutes, several different times during the day, each time. And I think that's going to be what's going to help him to cry when you actually are holding him and helping him to cry. And I think you'll see the aggression vanish.

**Question 27:**

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:31:38](#) A parent is saying, "People tell me that I need to use a firm voice to let my three and a half year old know when I need them to listen." I think, you mean when you need him to obey you, to pay attention. "I don't want him to feel I'm yelling. He's a very sensitive kid. Is a firm voice necessary to get cooperation?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:31:55](#) Well, I think there are a lot of different tones of voices. So yes, there might be times when your child needs to know you're really serious. You might even be yelling, like an emergency, like he's running toward the streets, "Stop!" Right? That's a firm voice. That's a unique situation. Hopefully you're not doing that kind of thing very often, right? That's the important thing here.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:32:17](#) So a step down from that would be if he's ignoring you and you need him to pay attention to you, which is I think what you're talking about. And of course, you've tried other options first, right? You have come close to him. You're on his level. You've touched him. Usually that's enough to get his attention. If it isn't, you might even whisper in his ear. Maybe he hasn't noticed you because he's so involved in what he's doing. That does happen for kids. It even happens for my husband, so it certainly happens for children.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:32:44](#) None of that involves a loud voice. I suppose if he's doing something that you're trying to get his attention, like he's exuberant in the bathtub, he's splashing like crazy and you say, "Honey, stop slashing," and he keeps splashing, you might use a firm voice, "Honey, Honey," because you're trying to actually get his attention. So it's a loud voice, and he looks you in the eye and you say, "You are having so much fun splashing. Stop. No more splashing. Look at the floor. Who's going to clean this up?" Right? "And you're getting me all wet. No. No more splashing."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:33:23](#) Now, did you notice I had a sense of humor but I went back to, "No, no more splashing," in a firm voice? I don't think you ever need to be mean, right? Firm is not mean. Firm is, "You need to listen to me," right, but it's not disrespectful. You can always express your needs to the

other person without being disrespectful or attacking or being mean to them. I think it's that simple. This is what we're trying to teach children to do with their siblings. It's what we need to do with our children.

### Question 28:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:33:52](#)

We have a question here from a parent who is saying, "We're sure our 20-month-old understands a lot already. He's an active child. He's not calm most of the time. How can we talk to him about emotions, routines, special time?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:34:08](#)

You can talk about emotions all the time, but in a very simple way, because he's got receptive language. You're right. He understands much more than he can say, so you just say things like, "You are happy. You are mad." And you can read the article on the AhaParenting.com website called "Toddlers and Preschoolers: Teaching Them About Emotion", I think is what it's called, or "Helping Toddlers and Preschoolers learn about Emotion", and that will help you talk to him about emotions.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:34:36](#)

As far as routines go, he will learn about them by your doing them. And that's also true for special time. You talk about them as you do them. So you say, "After lunch, it will be nap time and then we're going to have special time and then we'll play outside again." That's a little too much for him to manage when he is a 20 months old, but the idea is that the discussion about the schedule and what's next helps children think ahead and develop their prefrontal cortex, which when they're under the age of six, they have a different sense of time than we do, actually. I'm jealous of their sense of time. I wish I could revisit what that really feels like. I can only get there in meditation, but they really don't have a sense of time and the routine and that's why it's important to actually say things to them that help them begin to organize time and the order of events in their lives.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:35:26](#) You asked also about setting limits with him. Always acknowledge what he wants even when you can't say yes. He won't necessarily still like your limits, but it will help him feel a little less pushed around. "You wish you could have more juice, don't you? You love that juice, right? You can have more juice later, sweetheart. Right now it's time for some eggs and toast to fill that tummy."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:35:46](#) You mentioned that he's always in motion. That's developmentally appropriate for toddlers, so you can connect with him with movement, especially movement that makes him laugh, like chasing him, tossing him around, dancing with him and all falling down together. I think when you play games like that with him, he'll feel more connected. He'll laugh more. And also, that will help him become more calm and able to connect with you and focus when you then want to read him a book or something.

#### **Question 29:**

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:36:15](#) A parent is asking about her daughter's thumb sucking. She's worried that it gets in the way of interacting with other kids. And she says, "I know she's unpacking her emotions." I don't know if that's what's going on. She's certainly self-soothing, but she's probably emotion stuffing, is my bet. Your goal is to help her feel safe enough to take her thumb out of her mouth and cry, and then she won't need that thumb the way she does now. I would step up your preventive maintenance, your laughter, to increase safety, and try to sit down next to her sometime while she's sucking her thumb and draw her attention to it, not in a critical way, but more like just gently touch the hand that's in her mouth and really create safety. Look lovingly into her eyes. Just bring yourself completely present and shower her with love and adoration.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:37:14](#) I have seen kids in that situation actually take their thumb out of their mouth and begin to cry. Now, she might not do that, but if she doesn't, get her laughing instead, even while she's sucking. You could suck your own thumb. You could just begin to make thumb-sucking a time when you find other ways to help her offload those feelings with

laughter or tears. And I think you'll see a shift and she will stop sucking. I do think if she were older, you could talk with her about it more, but because she's only three, I think it's better if it's her idea to stop, and she's not going to want to stop. She'll be scandalized by the idea. But what you can do, is you can reduce the need that's driving the thumb sucking.

### Question 30:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:38:05](#)

So a couple more questions that are about ways that kids soothe themselves through their feelings, and they are actually stuffing their feelings. One question is about the pacifier and one is about thumb sucking. So they're really the same question. Yes, it is a big deal to give up a pacifier and give up thumb sucking, so there will be a lot of meltdowns. Absolutely right. And your job is to give your child a chance to work through those feelings and really honor the sadness. Your child had a relationship with the pacifier or the thumb, and you need to really honor that sadness the way we would honor any other loss.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:38:48](#)

It's not exactly a death in the family or a death of a pet, but I'd say it's on the next rung down to lose your comfort object, essentially. And so I would say yes, you're right. That's why he's having lots of meltdowns and you want to basically soothe him through it and give him other ways that you can to process his emotions, including you can't miss opportunities for him to laugh all day, every day. That's really important. He needs to get in daily laughter to work through those feelings, and hopefully he'll do a lot of crying as well.

### Question 31:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:39:26](#) Our next question is from a parent who says, "Our three and a half year old twin boy is lately often very aggressive, shouty, and refuses to listen to what anyone says. He chews on a safety blanket a lot, has always done that. He runs off, dislikes physical contact, making it difficult for us to connect and calm him down. We rarely know what triggers him and find it hard to empathize with his feelings. We can't break through his defensive barrier. His twin is okay. We treat them the same."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:39:52](#) So yes, if he's not an identical twin, he's going to be a different person, so he's highly sensitive or has some tendency to anxiety or both, and I say that because he chews on a safety blanket a lot. He's always done that. That's anxiety. The reason your son is aggressive and shouty and refuses to listen to what anyone says is that he's got some big feelings that he doesn't know how to handle, right? Aggression comes from fear. And you say you don't know what triggers him, so you find it hard to empathize with the feelings. You don't have to know what the feeling is specifically. You can just say, "You're so upset. I see you running away. I see you don't want me to touch you." Right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:40:38](#) So you're describing his behavior rather than the feeling. You're just using the word upset, or you can say, "This isn't what you wanted, is it?" Right? So you don't have to know specifically, but describing the feeling is often good. If you can see that his face looks upset, you can say, "I see your face is looking sad," or, "Your face is looking scared," or, "I see your eyebrows are looking like this and your mouth is looking like this. You are so mad." Right? So, you can describe what you see even if you don't know exactly what he's feeling.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:41:13](#) You say you can't break through his defensive barrier. So, that is something you do with the peaceful parenting tools. So, when you have special time where you spend daily time with him, without his brother around, that's what helps you break through the defensive barrier. When you do roughhousing, again, you can do it with both boys together, but I would do some rough housing with just him every day because that will help you break through that defensive barrier.

Once you use those tools and once you do offer understanding and empathy, on a 24/7 basis, then, he will start to cry. And that's the defensive barrier you're trying to get him to let you through.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:42:00](#)

Notice, none of that takes words, or at least he doesn't have to use any words. So, using the peaceful parenting tools should help you break through that defensive barrier and you won't even have to get him to talk, to say anything. Because it's not a verbal process, the emotional healing you're looking for, it's a visceral process of making a connection heart to heart. And you do that by creating connection with him as much as possible, as often as possible, including those times when he's upset and you simply go with him. So when he runs off, you go sit near him and you say, "You are having a hard time. I see you chewing on your blanket. I am right here with a hug when you're ready." Right? So you're not asking him to verbalize anything. You're just making it safe for him to have those feelings, to show you what he feels, and you're making it obvious that you are there with love and comfort to help him feel better whenever he's ready.

### Question 32:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:43:12](#)

Our next question is about washing. A parent asks, "How do I help my son overcome the anxiety of pooping again in the tub? He did this once and since then, he's afraid to have bath time. I tried empathy, that helped a little. He's 21 months old."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:43:29](#)

So, first of all, I would just say this is very common. There's something about being in the warm water, it relaxes the muscles. Kids this age are usually not potty trained or they're just beginning to be potty trained so they don't have a lot of control and they just relax and out it comes. I mean, if you think about it, if they're wearing a diaper the rest of the time, they just relax and out it comes. So, when they're in the bathtub and they poop, they're surprised often, and here's what ends up happening. Usually, the parent gets really upset about it. Like, "Oh my God, there's bacteria. Oh no, there's poop," and they grab the kid and

lift them out of the water really quickly. And that's not inappropriate. You don't want your kid sitting in poopy water. That's true. It is very germy.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:44:17](#)

But, the calmer we can stay when this happens, the better off everybody is. So you look at the poop and you go, "Oh look, there's poop. Okay, let's clean the poop up. Time to get out of the tub and we'll get back in in a minute." And you take your kid out and say, "Okay, let's fish out these toys. We're going to run them through the dishwasher." And then you fish out the poop and flush it and you let out the water and you get out your cleanser. And then you rinse it well and then you put your kid back in and rinse them well, maybe put some bubble bath in and it's all good.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:45:02](#)

However, sometimes the surprise of seeing the poop in the water scares kids, even when parents handle this relatively well. So, a child, especially an older toddler who is trying to potty train, might look at the poop and go, "Oh my God, is that a bug? Is that something bad? It's not a toy, right?" Toddlers haven't yet developed the disgust reaction fully, and so, some toddlers may not really care at all. They may want to play with it if they're a young toddler.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:45:35](#)

Even if the parent is completely blasé about it, the older toddlers sometimes will look at the poop and be like, "Oh my God, what is that in the tub with me? Is that a bad thing?" And, at that point, you do exactly what I've just described, but you are even more relaxed about it and say, "Oh, it's just poop. Poop belongs in the toilet." And that's, by the way, a great rule in general, when you change diapers, to take the poop and dump it in the toilet and say, "Bye-bye poop, poop belongs in the toilet," and then when the poop appeared in the tub, you would do exactly the same thing. You fish it out with something that can then go in the dishwasher and get totally cleaned, and you say, "Okay, poop, bye-bye, poop goes in the toilet," and you have your child wave goodbye and flush the toilet.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:46:28](#)

And as long as you're doing this in a very calm manner, your child is like, "Oh, that's what happens to poop. Poop from the diaper goes in the toilet, poop from the tub goes

in the toilet. No problem." Don't worry that your child will make a habit of this. Your child will learn to not poop in the tub. It's rare for kids to do this more than once or twice. Usually they do it once and they're like, "Oh, right, poop belongs in the toilet."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:46:54](#)

So, most of the time, kids don't respond badly when this happens unless the parent responds badly. So, I'm going to assume in this case that maybe you didn't know what to do and you were a little freaked out when this happened and that transmitted itself to your child, and they are worried, not only that they've displeased you, they may be worried that they were in danger in the tub because there was this thing floating there that you seemed very afraid of. They think somehow they created it, which they did, they may even know they created it, and they're worried about it. So, you want to get your child back in the tub. You also don't want to get this in the way of potty training.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:47:34](#)

So, at this point, you said you had offered empathy and that helped a little. That's great. I think I'd also do a puppet show. I'm a big fan of using stuffed animals to act out a scenario. So I would grab a mommy and baby stuffed animal, and by the way, it's great if you have a puppet that's a mom and baby teddy bear puppet or dolphin puppet or whatever. If you don't, you can use any animals and establish that it's the mom and the baby or the dad and the baby just by the way they talk to each other, and have the baby be taking a bath in the puppet show, which you can do with stuffed animals, you don't need puppets, and have the baby say to the mom, "Oops, I pooped in the tub." And the mom, in a relaxed way, says, "Okay, that's okay. Poop goes in the potty," and scoops out the poop.

The puppet is just pretending to do this: scoops out the poop and puts it in the toilet and flushes it, "Bye-bye poop." And then, "Okay, let's clean the water." And they let the water out and then they put new water in and don't make a big deal of it in the puppet show. Kids are usually fascinated when they see us acting something out that is relevant to their life. And so, I think your child will love watching this.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:48:55](#)

And I would also, by the end of the puppet show, do something funny to get your child laughing. That reduces the anxiety around this. And I think that might be enough.

And then, when it comes time for bath time, if your child insists on standing in the tub or is scared to get in the tub, that's very common. You're just going to have to pull out all the stops to lure your child back into the tub. So, I recommend getting some toy that your child doesn't usually use in the tub that will be interesting for them. It could just be some new colorful bath cups, stacking cups. You could get those markers that they can draw on the inside of the tub. You could get those little tablets that color the water different colors.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:49:41](#)

Some kids love bubbles, but since your child may have been frightened by seeing the poop in the tub, they may not want bubbles because they may worry there's something under the bubbles. So, I think bubbles could backfire. I would try some of these other ideas first.

Give your child a lot of control in terms of turning on the water and testing the water and splashing in the water and stuff, just leaning over the tub. And then sort of lure your child in with these toys.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:50:09](#)

If she doesn't want to sit down, that's totally fine. She can stand up. If she's really uncomfortable with the idea of sitting down, you could even say, "Are you worried about sitting down because of the poop before? Don't worry. That's okay. Poop's okay, we can handle it if that happens. No worries." Your child may still insist on standing up, but it will reassure her that you understand and that it really is okay. And gradually, she'll forget and she'll sit down or you'll say, after three baths with her standing up, if she hasn't started to sit down by herself, you might say, "Will you sit just for a moment and I can wash your feet? You want to sit right here?" And just help her sit down and wash her feet and she'll forget to get back up. And if she does get back up, and you can say to her, "You can get back up when you're ready," and if she does get back up, fine, but she probably won't. And I think you'll find that this will work.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:51:06](#)

If she still resists even getting in the tub, then there's a letter on the Aha! Parenting website, "Baby Won't Take a

Bath:, I think it's a 14 month old in that case. I think that baby was afraid of going down the drain because the mom had, for the first time, drained the water while the baby was in the tub, and I advised her to get a baby bathtub and start bathing the baby in the baby bathtub on the floor of the bathroom next to the bathtub and then to gradually move the baby bathtub into the big bathtub so the baby could be there. And then if you start filling the tub with water and they're in their little boat, then they're wanting to get out of the baby bathtub and be in the bathtub. And that did work in that example.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:51:55](#)

You'll see the exchange that I had with that mom and you can follow those steps if you need to, but I don't think that'll be necessary. I think you'll find that just making the tub interesting and being very relaxed about the whole thing and doing a little puppet show with stuffed animals will probably get your child past this fear.

### Question 33:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:52:11](#)

Our next question is from a parent who says, "Our three year old is very bright and loves learning and is especially motivated by our encouragement and praise. However, she only wants to try when she thinks she can do it. If something is harder or takes practice, she makes an initial attempt and then gives up. It seems partly being afraid to fail and partly used to things being easy. How do we keep her development moving along and teach her work ethic?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:52:36](#)

Okay, so you're seeing the limits of praise. This is what happens when you use praise. Encouragement is great, praise is not great. When you praise a kid, they worry that they have to achieve and perform and impress you, and then when things are harder, they feel they're failing. They don't want to fail, they don't want to prove they're not good. So, encouragement is really important and I want to encourage you to encourage her, but encouragement is something that tells a child to keep trying, not to achieve. So when you say she's motivated by your encouragement and praise, you want your encouragement to be about process, not product. So for instance, "Wow, I saw you

didn't give up. You kept trying on that even though that's super hard. You don't have it mastered yet. You haven't figured it out yet," or, "You didn't know yet how to do this, but you're learning every day. You're going to get better and better at it."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:53:39](#)

Encourage and give a lot of attention to all the things that lead to success, like never giving up or trying even though you didn't think you could do it. And when she does actually accomplish something, you're empathizing with her. You're not evaluating her. So you say something like, "It looked like that made you really happy that you figured out how to do it. Did that make you happy? You were trying hard to do that and you figured it out yourself." I want to say I've been around a mom and baby this week and every other word out of the mom's mouth is, "Good job," to her baby. And we had a discussion. She thought that's how to best encourage her child. But, as we talked about it, she realized, all she's really trying to do is empathize with him. When he was dancing in the kitchen and was enjoying himself dancing, and she said, "Good job," to him, she could have said, "It's fun to dance, isn't it? You love dancing." Right? He would've gotten so much more out of that.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:54:45](#)

I think she really got it when I said this to her, because she's not trying to evaluate him, but when we say, "Good job," we're evaluating the child. And the research shows that when you say good job for a few years, by the time a kid is three, they're worried about doing a bad job. Right? They're worried about not getting, "Good job," when they do something, so they give up. If it's hard, then they won't get a "Good job," right? Kids need to know that things are hard and that's okay. Hard things make you stronger. We can do hard things, especially when we support each other.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:55:23](#)

So, I would suggest that you read the end of my workbook, the *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids* workbook has some stuff on encouragement that is along these lines that will help you. And also, the final chapter of the *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids* book. The fifth chapter is on Mastery. So if you're a little behind in the course and you haven't read that chapter yet or the week on Mastery, then, by all

means, read that week and read the articles that are linked on the course page, on Mastery. Read those articles, because you never need to teach a child a work ethic. Never. The reason your child isn't doing this isn't because she's a lazy and has no work ethic. It's because you have talked to her, almost certainly, in ways that have made her feel like she might not be performing up to par, and therefore she doesn't want to try if she might fail.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:56:17](#)

And I want to add, nothing personal to you on this, that this is so common in parenting today, that parents want to encourage their kids so they use a lot of praise. And I've noticed it's also very common in oldest children because oldest children get a little too much attention. So, it's great when we attend to a child when they need us. When they reach out to us, we're responsive, we're there. But the rest of the time we shouldn't be sitting around letting the child dictate what's going to happen next. We should be living life, washing the dishes, emptying the dishwasher, sweeping the floor, and the child should be allowed to participate. And we should say to them, "Oh, thank you for helping." And it isn't an evaluation. It's appreciation, it's excitement, it's an encouragement if something's hard, like, "You can do it. Yes, it goes that way. Yes, you tried. You almost got it." Right?

Dr. Laura Markham [01:57:18](#)

When we do that, kids stop feeling like they have to perform and they start feeling like they're appreciated and valued and there's not quite so much riding on everything they try. With oldest children, we often expect them to do something and then we admire it and tell them, "Good job." That's enough to make anybody anxious and not willing to stick their neck out. And that's what's going on here. This is not a child with a work ethic problem. Children don't have work ethic problems. This is a child who's scared to try because she's afraid to fail. And if it's hard, she's afraid it will look hard to you and there must be something wrong with her that she can't do it easily.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:58:00](#)

So, I hope when you do that reading and do that practicing, that will help you. And I would also suggest you might want to bring this up on the Facebook group that's part of this course and ask people how they have worked with this because all parents start off from this place in our

culture of, "Oh, tell them good job all the time," and then they try to wean themselves away from it as they do this kind of parenting and they see the bad effect on their child of having said, "Good job," all the time.

And I think you'll find a lot of support and a lot of good, encouraging words that you can say to your child. There are some in the workbook, but also, have an exchange on the page and I think you'll find lots of ideas from other parents.

### Question 34:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:58:50](#)

"Meltdowns have been an issue for her since she was 18 months old. There are days where every single thing that happens causes tears, kicking, hitting. We have tried every single thing. No punishment changes her behavior or matters to her. She insists that I, her mom, do everything for her. She can be brutally mean to my husband. She literally spends hours responding in grunts and growls. How do we get through to her that meanness will not be tolerated when she's upset?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:59:17](#)

Well, I hear how upsetting your daughter's behavior is, but since you've tried every single thing, it sounds like you've been trying punishments, and that's made this worse. Punishment will always worsen behavior like this. So, I can't diagnose why your three year old is acting this way, but clearly something is wrong. So, I think you have a much bigger problem on your hands than getting across to her that meanness will not be tolerated when she's upset. Your problem is that your daughter is upset, she's communicating that something is very wrong, and you're more concerned about her behavior at those moments. I think you need to figure out what is very wrong. There's something going on with her that clearly is causing it, that we don't know what it is.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:00:02](#)

Your daughter, from what you say, is able to manage herself at school. So, it sounds like that's not a physical issue. If she were having a physical issue, she would be doing this at school as well as at home. So, again, I would

just ask you to leave no stone unturned. Maybe there's some issue in the family, maybe there's something else stressing her. I mean, clearly she feels comfortable enough at home to show you all that upset, but it does seem like something else is going on.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:00:31](#)

So, I'm going to suggest to you that in addition to the preventative maintenance tools, I suggest you work with one of the parenting coaches that I've trained and I think they'll be able to get you some immediate traction. They'll be able to see if there's something you could do to turn the situation around quickly. So, you can go on the Aha! Parenting website and put coaching into the search box or coaches. You also can simply write an email to [administrator@ahaparenting.com](mailto:administrator@ahaparenting.com).

### Question 35:

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:00:59](#)

Our next question is from a parent who says, "Our two-year-old was born high energy, anxious, persistent, woke up hourly at night to cry for the first year. I sat up at night holding him and carried him constantly throughout the day. Even at two, he wakes up crying for me a few times a night. He fights diapers and car seats. I'm at home with my kids, they sleep in my bed, we wrestle, we stay connected with play. How do I meet my son's needs while not neglecting my other two kids?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:01:28](#)

Well, you've done a wonderful job caring for your high needs son. I notice that one of your other two kids is a new baby. I can't imagine how you're coping with such a high needs two year old and a new baby. You asked me how to meet everyone's needs. You have a new baby and two other children and you're in a situation where the only thing you can do is triage, which means only the very most important things.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:02:05](#)

So, if you're able to co-sleep and stay connected with play and laughter, then you're doing the most important things for your kids. Your most important tool, though, is going to be for you to develop that nurturing voice in your own head to talk you through those difficult moments where

everyone needs you at once, because a new baby is going to be demanding and the child that you've just described to me is high needs, and you have yet another child.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:02:32](#)

So, I also want to add that things will get easier in a year as your two-year-old gains the developmental ability to regulate better and communicate in words. But it's important that during this next period of time, he sees you as on his side, even though there's a new baby in the family. This is the time period where he's going to be drawing conclusions about whether he's still valued, adored and whether you're still able to show up for him and meet his needs. You want him to end this next year more calm and reasonable, not with a chip on his shoulder, which means he needs to believe you can meet his needs.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:03:04](#)

And by the way, this is entirely possible. It is overwhelming. That's why the voice in your head is the most important thing so that you can sustain yourself, but these highly sensitive kids, they find the world to be overwhelming at first, but as they grow up, they become very empathic. I actually have a daughter like that.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:03:25](#)

You mentioned that your husband works the night shift. That is really hard, but it could be a blessing if it means that he's able to be awake some of the time when the children are awake, either before a shift or after it. I know it's a lot to ask of him when he's bringing in the paycheck, but this is an all hands on deck moment. When you both decided to add a new baby to the family, even though your youngest was so high needs, it meant that you were committing to support each other through what was bound to be a difficult time. You and your husband have bitten off more than most people could chew, so you must have a lot of confidence in your joint ability to survive the chaos, to support each other, to dig deep inside each of you to find love for each other and also for your children.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:04:09](#)

I know this must seem daunting at times, but just remember, you can postpone anything but love and there is always more love. Start with keeping your own cup full. I'm sending you big hugs.

**Question 36:**

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:04:24](#)

Our next question is from a parent who says, "My daughter, two, cries and throws things when I do things that don't directly involve her like the dishes or making dinner. Even though I spend the majority of my day playing with her, I find myself feeling guilty anytime I try to do other things because she cries and gets mad. She's in daycare two days a week and the rest of the time she's with me and my husband."

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:04:47](#)

So, it sounds like your daughter gets mad and throws things when you try to make dinner, so maybe you stop and spend time with her at that point, but I don't know if that's actually guilt. Guilt implies you're doing something that is out of integrity. In this case, you say that you spend the majority of your day playing with your daughter, so maybe you're actually not feeling guilt, but maybe something else like worry that your daughter is angry with you and unhappiness about that. So, I would ask you to really look at how it feels when she is mad at you and work through whatever comes up because I think that's what's getting you in trouble here, is that you respond to your daughter's anger with worry and guilt.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:05:35](#)

So, I am going to encourage you to stand more clearly in your own inner compass, not to be mean to your daughter, to be completely sympathetic to her response to you. After all, it's normal for your two year old not to like it when you take your attention away from her to make dinner and she's not necessarily able to fend for herself. She is only two, and you're her main playmate, it sounds like. So you do want to help her learn to play near you, but not with you. That's an important developmental leap for kids to make, and you can do that when you're in the same room with her and available to her earlier in the day where you can play next to her, doing something while she plays next to you doing something a little bit different, but without complete engagement. That gets her used to the idea.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:06:27](#)

I also would encourage you to get a safety tower. You can look on the website, the Aha! Parenting website, put the word safety tower into the search box, and you'll see what they are, and set your daughter up next to you while you work in the kitchen. I think safety towers for this kind of child are lifesavers. So, do try to meet her needs and be empathetic with her when she's unhappy that your attention is elsewhere, and at the same time, this is a limit that you need to set, that sometimes you do need to do things like make dinner.

I would encourage you to not let it be a major part of your day. It shouldn't be a one hour job to cook dinner because it's not normal for your two year old to let you go for that long. So you certainly try to occupy her safely, you can even put her in a high chair next to you while you cook, but you can't let your daughter decide when you can make dinner and if you let her tantrums make your decisions, then you're sabotaging her development.

### Question 37:

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:07:25](#)

Our next question is from a parent who says, "My two and a half year old son who's highly sensitive and has a medical trauma history, still has meltdowns every day. His scheduled meltdowns at bedtime often last for an hour with sweating and thrashing. He's clearly processing fear. Other meltdowns during the day seem related to overstimulation, but he seems very happy in between. Is this okay and what else can I do to help him process these big emotions?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:07:51](#)

So, I would say yes, it's okay since he seems happy in between. I would also look at how he feels immediately after. Does he feel better? Does he seem to have worked through something so that he seems lighter and happier? Because usually you can see that difference after the scheduled meltdown.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:08:09](#)

You ask what else you can do besides special time, rough housing, laughter, reading books about emotions, et cetera. I would normally recommend that you see an

EMDR specialist, but I know you're in Costa Rica and you say there aren't any there. I'm going to actually urge you to consider a vacation, a special trip to New York or someplace else where there are lots of EMDR docs. For those of you who don't know what EMDR is, it's eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, and it's been proven to be an effective treatment for trauma, but you always want to get somebody who is well trained and very experienced. So, I would always go through the EMDRIA, which is the website of the International Association for EMDR Practitioners, to find someone in your location who actually has full training in EMDR.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:09:07](#)

The reason I'm recommending this, even though it's a big deal to take your kid to another country for treatment, is that he's obviously still processing trauma and you want to get help sooner rather than later because his brain is developing around this trauma. So even though you're able to help him heal, I think having expert intervention in trauma is always helpful. I myself am not a trauma specialist, so I wouldn't consider myself adequately trained to do this. So if I had a child with medical trauma history, I would actually be seeking out an expert with EMDR training to help my child work through it.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:09:50](#)

So, I would also do some play with him to work this out. You know, in medical trauma, kids are held down and immobilized while they're subjected to painful, scary medical procedures. That means the body gets mobilized to run, to escape, but it's not allowed to do so. It's immobilized so it can't. So, part of releasing the trauma is allowing the body to reclaim that response that was frozen up inside.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:10:14](#)

There's a book I would highly recommend you called *Trauma Proofing Your Child*. It's by Peter Levine, who's one of the leading experts in treating trauma. It describes, one part of the book, a child named Sammy who had a medical trauma and it describes a lovely scenario where they repeatedly played with a teddy bear, who they pretended was injured, and he was then held down and immobilized. And of course the child was completely terrified by this, but gradually, with the parents' support, was able to work up the courage to rescue the bear. So, with the repeated

playing of this game, the parent took the lead at first, but gradually, the child took the lead and started doing the rescuing, which helped him move beyond his traumatized behavior that he was showing outside of the game. Clearly he was resolving the actual trauma by playing this game. So that kind of play might be very helpful to your son, depending on what his medical trauma actually was. So, I think there are many things you can do to help your son heal, but I would also really consider getting professional help for him.

### Question 38:

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:11:25](#)

A parent asks, "What do we do when our toddler is screaming and crying and we can't get a word in to empathize with him or comfort him? Do you wait until he's done crying, or try to talk to him even though he doesn't hear you?" I think the answer is you wait to talk with him. When a child is in a state of emergency, he really can't process your words, especially if he's only two years old, but even older kids. All he needs to know is that he's safe and you don't have to talk to create that safety. You can do that with your presence. So, just breathe and stay compassionate and breathe some more, and soon he'll be in your lap.

Dr. Laura Markham: [02:12:02](#)

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](http://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.