

Setting Limits and Discipline with Toddlers Q and A with Dr. Laura Markham

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:00:00](#) Hello. This is Dr. Laura Markham. In this audio I'll be answering some of the most common questions that parents ask about setting limits and discipline 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. So let's see how to apply these three big ideas to daily life with children.

Question 1:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:00:40](#) Hi, I'm glad to talk to you.

Parent: [00:00:43](#) Hi. Me too. Thank you so much for all the work you do.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:00:46](#) So what's your question?

Parent: [00:00:47](#) Yeah. So I have an almost 16-month-old and my question isn't for quite yet, it's just more for anticipating in the future based on some things that you've said in all of the resources that you have available for us. I was wondering when you give a child a choice, like you said when it's time to go in the car seat and maybe they don't want to or they need to, you say, "Would you like the red cup or the blue cup?" Or, "Do you want to go in your car seat yourself or do you want me to fly you into your car seat?" These different examples. I was wondering what happens if you give that choice and they still say, "No." Or they don't pick the choice. I was wondering what happens at that point.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:01:36](#) What you're saying happens a lot. You say to your two-year-old, "You can climb in your car seat or I can fly you in." And your two-year-old yells, "No. No car seat." Right? It's not that unusual.

Parent: [00:01:50](#) Right.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:01:51](#) The reason we're giving the choice is mostly so the child won't feel pushed around because it helps them to feel like they have some agency. We're only offering them choices we can live with, obviously. Sitting down in the driveway is not one of the choices we're giving this two-year-old even though that's what they want to do at the moment. So at that point, that's not the tool that you're going to use to get cooperation, right? There are other tools you can use to get cooperation. So you say, "You don't want to climb into your car seat. You don't want to get in your car seat at all, do you?" And your two-year-old says, "No!" And you say, "You wish you didn't have to get in your car seat." And your two-year-old says, "Yes!"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:02:31](#) Now, you've just started to make progress because instead of reflexive no, you're getting a reflexive yes because he feels understood. At that moment your child is already starting to follow your lead, so to speak. It doesn't mean they want to get in the car seat, but at least there's not a reflexive anger going on. They're starting to agree with you, because truthfully you agreed with them. You understood. And you say, "I know. You wish you didn't have to get in your car seat. We need to go now. We need to go pick up daddy at the airport," or whatever it is you have to do. "We need to get food for dinner. We need to get food."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:03:08](#) And then you switch gears and you try to provide some incentive for them. "We're going to get food for dinner at the grocery store. You remember the grocery store, the one where the cheese sticks are. Would you like a cheese stick when we go to the grocery store?" And all of a sudden your toddler says, "Yes!" And you say, "Great! Shall I fly you into your car seat or are you going to climb like a mountain climber?" Now your child, all of a sudden, you've slightly rephrased the choice and it sounds much more palatable to them and maybe they'll be a mountain climber, right?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:03:38](#) So choices are not the only way you get cooperation. It is certainly one of the first ways you try but there are many ways to get cooperation. There's playfulness, there's partnering, there's giving your child something that meets another need. We certainly meet our children's needs for

food and for sleep, but they have all kinds of other needs too, like autonomy. Autonomy, being independent, that's something every 16-month-old or two-year-old needs. And they want to climb like a mountain climber as long as they don't feel pushed around, and as long as they have some other incentive -- like there's a cheese stick waiting at the grocery store, right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:04:19](#)

We're allowing them to meet other needs. It's not just the autonomy of making the choice, we're constantly working with our child to see how we can find a win/win situation, how we can be respectful, how we can be empathetic so they feel understood. All of the work that we're doing develops the prefrontal cortex. So offering your child a choice develops the prefrontal cortex and also thinking about the future develops the prefrontal cortex, right? All of the things that your child makes a decision on and then does something, develops the prefrontal cortex. So any of the things that you're doing like this are going to help your child to, A, be a better thinker and make better choices as they get older, but also to be more cooperative with you as they get older.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:05:07](#)

Does that help?

Parent: [00:05:08](#)

Okay. And so the cheese stick wouldn't be a bribe? That would actually be okay?

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:05:13](#)

That's a great question and I don't have, that I know of, any other questions pre-submitted about bribes. We answer one question per family but I know a lot of people have this question so I am going to go ahead and answer it. The deal with the bribe is this: If you're finding a win-win solution and you're happy to buy your child a cheese stick because you were going to buy cheese sticks anyway and that's something for them to look forward to, I don't even think of that as a bribe. That's more like, "When we get in the car seat, then we can go get the cheese sticks." Right? "When, then". I didn't coin that. I think Jane Nelson of Positive Discipline coined the idea of "when, then". It's very effective.

Parent: [00:05:48](#)

Okay.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:05:49](#) Basically if we train the child that they can always get something from us and they can withhold good behavior to get that thing, like, "What will you give me if I clean up my room? What will you give me?" Then you know you've gone too far in this direction and that your child is expecting a reward for doing something that is just expected. At that point, it's not about the child. It's about you. You can say, "Oops. Got to dial that one back." Right? But the problem with bribes is it digs us into a hole where our child has power because basically they won't behave unless we give them something. It's like extortion on their part. But it's not their fault they're extorting us if we've trained them to do that. Right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:06:32](#) I don't think that saying to your child that they're going to get a cheese stick at the grocery store is extortion on his part because he didn't come up with it, number one. But it's true that the next time you go to the grocery store, your child will probably ask for a cheese stick. That is true. And if you're not happy with that, then that's where the chickens come home to roost. I mean, I would only offer something you're happy with. I think of cheese sticks as something that one often has around for toddlers and so that's why I came up with it. But if you're not going to want to let your child have a cheese stick often when you go, then pick something you are going to let your child have, so that you don't dig yourself into a hole to begin with.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:07:08](#) But if you find you have inadvertently dug yourself into a hole, and your child's like, "Mom, last time we were here, I got that and I want it now." A cookie at the bakery that you walked by or something. Then you can say, "I know you wish you could have a cookie at the bakery every time we come to the grocery store because it's right here. But we don't get cookies except for special times. I know that's so disappointing." And then you have a tantrum or a meltdown or crying. But your kid understands, "Oh, okay. I guess we don't get cookies every time." And you can forgive your child for asking the next time they pass the bakery, but eventually they will learn that they don't get one every time.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:07:43](#) I don't think it ends up being a bribe unless it becomes a regular thing and I wouldn't let something not healthy be a regular thing. Does that make sense?
- Parent: [00:07:52](#) Okay. Yeah. That does make sense. Thank you very much.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:07:56](#) All right. You're so welcome.

Question 2:

- Parent: [00:08:02](#) Hi. I actually submitted this on the Peaceful Parenting Facebook page but didn't quite get an answer that resonated with me and so I thought maybe you could be of help.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:08:14](#) Okay.
- Parent: [00:08:15](#) I have a two-year-old going onto three in January and he is a very lively, very strong-willed child, very similar in personality to me. I am fine when he has tantrums. I can be calm. I can be empathetic, even when he's angry with me. What I get triggered by is when he is not tantruming but is being very obstinate in a defiant way like, "Look at me. I'm going to do exactly what you told me not to." Or I'll give him a choice or I'll tell him not to do something because either it's for his own safety or safety of someone else and he'll do exactly what I tell him not to do. Or I'll tell him what I do want him to do and he'll do the opposite of that. He just has that gleam in his eye of, "Ha ha." You know, with a smirk on his face. My jets just go into gear. I don't know what to do at that moment besides want to yell at him.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:09:48](#) So, when you were little, if you were defiant and directly disobeyed an order from your parents, what would have happened?
- Parent: [00:10:11](#) I could not tell you. I have blocked out a lot of my childhood. Not that it was horrible or overly abusive.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:11](#) I bet that what would have happened to you when you were little if you were defiant is that it would have been an emergency. Right? Do you think so?
- Parent: [00:10:22](#) For sure.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:23](#) Yeah. When someone's defiant, it's an emergency. It's so interesting that when he tantrums you can handle it, when he's expressing his pain.
- Parent: [00:10:33](#) Correct.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:33](#) But when he's choosing to defy you, which by the way, is totally normal behavior for toddlers and preschoolers. Really for teenagers too. When they're choosing to defy you, your response is to see red at that moment.
- Parent: [00:10:54](#) Totally.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:10:54](#) Because you're going into a state of emergency, which I suspect really is about what happened in the past for you. So let's pull the camera back from that moment where you're with your three-year-old and he gets that gleam in his eye and he's going to do exactly what you just asked him not to do. Let's pull the camera back. We know from your point of view how you're feeling. You're like, "Do not defy me." But from his point of view, what do you think might be going on from his point of view? If we just move away from you for a minute and we're looking at it from his point of view. What do you think he's thinking and feeling at that moment?
- Parent: [00:11:32](#) I mean, I can only guess. I don't know if he's just saying, "Oh, let's see how she's going to react." I mean, he's not thinking, "Will she keep her word?" But he's looking for inconsistencies I guess, maybe.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:11:48](#) Right, right. Is this a solid boundary or is this a doorway? Is this a wall or a doorway? He's like, "Well, does she really mean it? I really want to do this. I know she told me not to do it but I really want to do it. Does it really matter to her or maybe I could push on this boundary a little bit?" Strong-willed kids are experiential learners, right?

- Parent: [00:12:10](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:12:12](#) He's like, "Okay. Well, I'm trying to see how this particular boundary works. I'm going to try it out." Is he saying to himself, "Oh, well, she's asked me not to do this but I really don't respect her as an authority figure or a human being or even as my mother and so I'm just going to do what the heck I want." Is he thinking that? No. No, not at all. He's thinking, "Wow. Well, I'm three and my job is to test every limit I come across and I'm an experiential learner and I know she said not to do it and usually I like to do what she tells me because she's pretty good. She's got my back. But, you know, this one is something I really want and maybe she doesn't really feel so strongly about it and I'm going to try it." Right? That's it. That's all that's going on.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:12:57](#) There's no disrespect. There's no added freight of even indicting your relationship. There's nothing there except, "I'm three and my job is to test the boundaries." That's what it is. So if you really believed that, and you weren't triggered at the moment, when he looks right at you and he gets ready to do that thing, what might be an appropriate response from you?
- Parent: [00:13:22](#) I don't know. That's my problem.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:13:25](#) Okay. What might he be doing that he's about to do that you've just told him not to?
- Parent: [00:13:30](#) Jump on the dog.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:13:32](#) Jump on the dog. Okay, great. Great example. So he's ready to jump on the dog and you're like, "No, no, no. Don't jump on the dog. Poor dog." Right? "Oh, be nice to him. Don't jump on the dog." And he looks right at you and he's like, "No. I actually like jumping on the dog. It gives me a sense of power. The dog yelps. I don't mean to hurt the dog or anything but the dog yelps. I get a sense of power with that. I like jumping on the dog." So he's ready to do it anyway and he's got this gleam in his eye but he's also testing his autonomy, like, "You can't make me. You're across the room. You can't really stop me, lady."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:14:10](#) You take that, you get triggered and you're like it's World War III here. He's not trying to have World War III. This is a simple testing of limits, right? You can zoom over, do your baseball slide or whatever you have to do to slide into base, and at the same time you're saying, "Whoa, whoa, whoa." And as you get there, scoop him up away from the dog. Even if you weren't triggered, you could do this. Scoop him up away from the dog and say, "Oh my goodness. We saved the dog. Thank goodness we saved the dog. That poor dog. He was about to get jumped on and it would have hurt his tummy. It would have made him yelp. He would have been so sad and scared. And he might even have bit you because sometimes when dogs are sleeping and you jump on them, they don't know who it is, they think it might be a monster jumping on them and they bite. We don't want you to get bitten. And also it's not fair to the dog. Good dog. Good dog." You pet the dog and you say, "We saved the dog! Yay! High five!"

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:15:15](#) You notice, he didn't have anything to do with saving the dog but now you've just redeemed him and you say, "You like to jump on the dog, don't you? But jumping on the dog hurts the dog. What could you jump on? Are you in a jumping on things mood? Are you a jump, jump, jumping bean boy today? Let's go jump on the couch," or whatever's an appropriate thing in your house. I always let my kids jump on the couch. If you don't want to do that, no. But whatever's an okay place to jump. "Let's go jump. Let's go outside and we'll jump." Whatever you need to do. But notice that I was able to do that because I wasn't triggered.

Parent: [00:15:49](#) Right.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:15:49](#) What could you say to yourself at that moment before you go to save the dog? As he's looking at you, what could you say to yourself as you're doing your slide that would disarm World War III? You'd have to remind yourself that your son is not actually initiating World War III at all. He's just doing normal three-year-old behavior, right?

Parent: [00:16:15](#) Yeah.

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

You know, I'm going to give you an assignment to do. You don't have to do it right now on the phone with so many people listening. Here's what you're going to do. You're going to go later and you're going to imagine that defiance and you're going to sit with whatever feelings come up in your body, as you see your son's face with that defiance on it. You're going to notice the feelings that come up in your body because those feelings are triggering you. So triggers are simply emotions from the past that we've been stopping, that overwhelm us in the moment, and we think they're about the moment and we act on them, right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:16:49](#)

But what is a feeling? What is an emotion? It's a set of sensations in your body. That's how you know you're having an emotion. Notice the sensations in your body. If you get a flash of a time you were defiant as a kid, fine. It doesn't matter. You don't ever have to know the original presenting problem. You only have to know how you feel in this moment when your son looks at you that way. Feel the feelings in your body. Breathe through them. Don't take any action. Don't get up and eat. Don't scream. Don't go yell at your son. Don't do anything except breathe into it and hold yourself with compassion. Because these are old feelings of yours that you're working your way through as you allow yourself to feel them. Because you couldn't feel them then because you were a kid and it would have been overwhelming to you, but you can feel them now.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:17:38](#)

I've had parents tell me that they sit with the feelings like this and they want to throw up. Fine. Feel that feeling. It'll go through you. Just breathe into it. Hold yourself in compassion. Just say, "I love you. I'm here. You're okay. We can do this." Let yourself feel the feelings. You'll get chills. It'll move through you. If you can do this more than once with this particular set of emotions, sensations from this emotion, you will find that the next time this happens you won't have nearly as loaded a reaction to your son. And after you do it a few times, come up with an anecdote, a mantra that you can say to yourself like, "He's acting like a three-year-old. It's my job to be the grown up." And keep a sense of humor. You can make a shorter version, play with it. But something that you can say to

yourself in those moments as you jump into stop the emergency. You can just remind yourself that it's not actually an emergency at all.

- Parent: [00:18:33](#) Yeah.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:18:33](#) Okay. Got it? Got your homework? Okay, all right. Enjoy.
- Parent: [00:18:39](#) Thank you.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:18:39](#) Bye-bye.

Question 3:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:18:41](#) Okay. Here's someone who's on week five but is having trouble setting limits with a three-year-old who's not listening and is hitting. This parent is saying, "My patience is thin. I tried being playful but when do they learn without needing to be coaxed?" Well, certainly not at age three. At age three they do need to be coaxed. Or you can set limits but then it needs to be empathetic limits. You don't have to turn it into a game. Listen, if you're not feeling playful, you don't have to turn it into a game. But you do have to use empathy and understanding as you set the limit or your child has no reason to follow it, unless you use force. If you're taking this course, you know that the research shows that force is not a good idea. So empathy is going to work a lot better if you want your kid to follow your limits.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:19:29](#) I get that you're new to this kind of parenting. Your child has no incentive to cooperate once you remove punishment and I think that's what's going on for you. You really need to focus on connection. That's the primary, most effective motivator. Games can help but they're not your primary tool. Connection and empathy are your most important motivator.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:19:50](#) You asked specifically about using the bathroom. And I think you can just have a rule about it like "We always use the bathroom before we leave the house." Then you use the bathroom too so she's not singled out, so she doesn't feel pushed around. And by the way, if you're home with her and you think she should use the bathroom, I wouldn't

fight with her about that. Her body's her responsibility. She's going to learn a lot faster if she has accidents, if you're just very matter of fact about the accidents. I know that different cultures have different approaches to toilet learning, but kids learn faster if it's their responsibility. Rather than a fight with you, which makes it your responsibility.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:20:27](#)

I wonder if you're knowing how to set an empathetic limit. So when you set a limit, set the limit. Don't back down. Empathize that your daughter doesn't like it. But it's okay for her to cry. That's not bad behavior. She's allowed to cry about it and you can stay kind and calm while she cries and that will bring her closer to you. Just keep focusing on connection, and the cooperation will come.

Question 4:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:20:51](#)

And moving on to a question from a parent who says, "I have a hard time staying calm when my three-year-old is doing things that feel like an emergency that needs to stop right away, like pulling a glass off the counter or choking his brother around the neck, or grabbing my hair in a painful way and not letting go of it. My response is to yell and sometimes grab him and I don't know what else to do."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:21:12](#)

You know what? There is nothing else to do. In that moment it feels like an emergency and you will act like it is and there is really no way not to do that, I'm sorry to say. That's true for all of us. When our kid runs in the street, we're not going to not yell. We're all going to yell. And when our kid is choking the other one around the neck, yes, it's true, you want to say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa." But you're going to be hightailing it over next to him to get his hands off his brother's neck, right? Of course you're going to yell and grab him. That makes perfect sense. The more you can do preventive maintenance, the less likely your three-year-old will do these things and you'll find that you won't need to respond this way either.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:21:57](#)

The older they get, the more judgment they have, also. And as long as they don't have a backpack of angry

emotions, a backpack of hurt emotions that are making them act angry, they won't actually do things like this out of spite. They may still grab the glass off the counter and knock it on the floor out of bad judgment but even though it feels like an emergency at the moment, that is not really an emergency. It's just broken glass. We've all had broken glass. You know, the more you do prevention with yourself also, which is like a meditation practice and listening to the daily inspirations, the more you'll be able to stay calm in those situations that aren't actually emergencies. But at that moment, it starts to feel like one.

Question 5:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:22:41](#)

A parent is asking, "My three-year-old daughter really pushes and I find it so hard to stay calm and hold a firm limit. She seems to be pushing purposefully to the point where I get mad and then she stops." Yeah. She stops because when you get mad, she freaks out. She's only three. When you get mad, she's like, "Oops. Pushed too far." She's trying to figure out where the boundaries are. How far can I push? Right? So there's a way that you could practice holding a boundary without needing to lose your temper and enforce it with rage. I mean, you're enforcing the boundary with anger at this point, with threat. It's basically a threat. I know you haven't necessarily threatened her, but your getting angry is like a threat to her.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:23:22](#)

So, I would say it's normal for children to push back. It's normal for them to keep pushing to find out where the limit is. I hear you're having a hard time learning to set limits and it sounds like you've been permissive as a parent. And so I would just suggest, do the homework for the discipline week and get good at empathizing as you set the limits. Remember, your daughter has an adjustment period here. She's not used to you setting limits so now you're setting them and you're going to hold them. But you don't have to get mad to hold them. I think that's the key. So keep practicing. I think you're in the very early stages of this journey. You are going to be able to set limits and hold them without falling apart.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:24:05](#)

And I do think doing your own self regulation and self care is going to make a tremendous difference in your being able to do this new kind of parenting that you haven't done in the past, especially because you didn't have that parenting model from your own childhood and you're learning how to do it. I would just say in the moment to stay calm, stop, drop, and breathe. Hold the limit. Keep breathing. You know, this will get better over time. Your daughter is only three. It will get better.

Question 6:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:24:41](#)

A parent is asking about her 26-month-old. "When I take a serious tone with him, he covers his eyes and giggles and won't look at me. I think he should be taking me more seriously." That's his discomfort. He's anxious at that moment. He's hiding, like fight or freeze. That's flight. He's hiding from you. In fact, the laughing is deflection which is flight. When you're using a stern tone for a reason like he just dumped his milk on the floor and you say, "I said no dumping milk on the floor. And now you're hiding and giggling. You don't like it when I say no to you but it makes a big mess. Look at this milk. Come on. Let's go. We need to clean this up. Help me clean it up. Come on. Let's get the sponge. We always clean up our own messes."

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

So you're not shaming and blaming, which would just make him hide more. You've given him a way to redeem himself and he'll come with you and get the sponge and then he's not laughing and hiding. He doesn't need to look at you seriously and look shame faced. That's actually a bad idea. That's a culturally prescribed idea of how you see that he's remorseful. Remorse often feels so uncomfortable for little ones that they hide behind giggling or they hide behind a blank face. Parents will say, "And he doesn't even have any remorse when he did this." Well, he didn't look like he had remorse, but that's what shame looks like. It's that blank face.

Question 7:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:26:05](#) Here's a question about a two-year-old. "She's started to resist me when I ask her to do something. She throws an extreme fit if I say something as simple as, 'Use your spoon while eating.' And she says, 'I hate you.' My wife thinks she may be holding negative feelings from the past when I spanked her a couple of times."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:26:22](#) It sounds like she doesn't do this with your wife so it does sound like this is something with your relationship with her. It might be that you've hurt her physically in the past. That's possible. Let's say, somebody you have a close relationship with had hurt you physically in the past but was now acting like things were normal, you might get along fine with him when things are fine but then when you have a disagreement with him, you might feel something like, "You are always mean to me. I hate you." Right? So it's entirely possible that's what's going on.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:26:52](#) You know, it's also possible ... I don't really have a lot to go on here but you said you tell your two-year-old to use her spoon while eating so she might feel like you're super controlling of her and that she needs more freedom, autonomy and the right to make her own decisions. Maybe you're setting expectations that are too high and she has to work really hard for your approval. We don't know exactly what's going on but to solve this, you mentioned you do a lot of connection time with her. Wonderful. When you go to set limits, remember that connection. Remember that you need to make sure to offer her connection at those times.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:27:40](#) Before you correct something she's doing, I guess we would say wrong, before you correct her, do you say to her, "Sweetheart, I see you're eating your food with your fingers. Can you try to eat it with your spoon? Can you try like this?" That shouldn't even be a correction. It should really be something that for a two-year-old should be fun, like you get a spoon and eat in front of her using the spoon, rather than you're correcting her on how she's using the spoon. Does that make sense? She's only a two-year-old so it wouldn't be a correction. She's clearly responding to it as if it is a correction. Your goal really is to always maintain the connection even as you correct.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:28:31](#) And by the way, when she says, "I hate you," don't get hooked on that. Hate is not an emotion. Hate is a position we take. It means "I am so angry at you that I never want to work things out with you." That's hate. When she says it, you can just say, "You're so angry at me that you're saying, 'I hate you.' You don't want to work things out with me but, you know what? We're a family. I will always work things out with you. You can be as mad as you want and I will love you no matter what."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:28:57](#) And then my final tip for you is to start working on empathy 24/7 to rebuild the trust between you, just in case the issue is that she feels you've hurt her in the past.

Question 8:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:29:09](#) A parent is saying that he finds himself threatening to take something away. It doesn't sound like you're taking away something unrelated. It sounds like you're taking things away when your daughter's not respectful. She's a three-year-old and she had a play tent that she was standing on and making it rip and you asked her not to stand on it. You can say, "Sweetie, if you're going to stand on it, we need to put the tent away, because it ruins the tent." That's fine. That's what you say and you take it away. You're not threatening and being vindictive about it. You're just saying we're going to need to put it away if you're going to need to stand on it.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:29:48](#) You know, kids are scientists, they're researchers. They don't know where the boundaries are unless we show them. What you're doing is, you're showing her that boundary and you're saying, "This is the rule for the tent. We don't step on it. If you can't use the tent without hurting the tent and ripping it, then we'll need to put it away, that's all. And we'll try again some other day. That's all." It's like if they throw sand, they have to get out of the sandbox. The important point here is that this is setting a limit. It's enforcing your limit. But you're not doing it in a mean way. You're doing it in a supportive way. When she cries when you put the tent away, you say, "I know. You really love the tent. We'll try again another day." That's it.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:30:28](#) I would really wait and do it another day and let her cry as much as she wants about it today. She knows what the limit was and she learns that you put the tent away. If you get it out right now, she might treat it respectfully but it's more likely she will stand on it and look at you like challenging at you, disrespectfully at you to see if you're really going to enforce it again. And then you're just upping the ante. You're just making it into a power struggle. I probably wouldn't get the tent out again that day. I would do it another day when she's not in the grip of these emotions. In the meantime, let her cry about it and that's fine.

Question 9:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:31:04](#) Tell me, what's your question?

Parent: [00:31:08](#) I have an almost three-year-old son and the problem is I'm too permissive with my son because I'm afraid to be too hard with him. I've been taking the course to learn how to set limits but still be peaceful and loving to him. My problem is that I also want him to participate and have his opinion. He likes to help me. For example, he wants to help me serve dinner so he wants to take things out of the fridge with me but that takes too long for me sometimes. I cannot always do it. In general when he doesn't get his way, he just loses it. When I'm on the phone with someone and I have asked him that he needs to be quiet, he starts to be more noisy and say, "Mom, mom, mom, this, that."

Parent: [00:32:08](#) I don't know how to manage that because that's a trigger for me. I don't know how to tell him, "No, you can't help me right now." Because he loses it. I push myself, my limits, to give him what he wants. My question is how do I set the limits so that I'm more in control and not him.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:32:34](#) You can't control him, no matter what, obviously. But he doesn't have to control you. You said, "So I'm more in control and not him." I think that it isn't a question of either/or, of one of you being in control. He's going to try

to get what he wants in the world. He's not even three years old yet. Of course, he's going to try to get what he wants in the world. That's his job. Your job is to keep him safe and keep him healthy and do your best to help him with his emotions and help him flourish as the unique human being he is, as well as meet your own needs so you can flourish too. That's your job.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:33:13](#)

I would say when you need to set a limit, like he wants to help get things out of the fridge to make dinner and that takes too long, it sounds like that's an important limit to you. To me, that wouldn't be an important limit. I would be like, "Okay. I really need the butter right now." That's fine. And say, "Let's get the butter fast. Let's work together on that." And I would pick him up and help him to get the butter and hand it to me and say, "Yay. Thank you! Okay, you can get the other things the way you want to now." And then you take the butter off and you start cooking or whatever.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:33:48](#)

I think there are ways to work with him and whenever possible that's the best way to work with a three-year-old. But let's say the one on the phone because that's a trigger for you and that's the kind of thing that there's really no way to work with your child. Obviously you're going to try to do prevention. All children, when we get on the phone, every child in the world feels like we're less available when we get on the phone or screen. Their job is to make sure we're available in case they need us, right?

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:34:18](#)

What if a tiger jumps out of the bushes? Their genetics say, "If a tiger jumps out of the bushes, is she going to save us?" Their job, again emotionally, is to keep you available and therefore as soon as you get on the phone kids will interrupt you. We can just count on that. The first thing you want to do is prevention. Before you get on the phone, you would say, "I'm going to make this call." Instead of just, "I need you to be quiet." More like, "It might be hard for you when I'm on the phone. You might want my attention but I won't be able to stop talking so what can you do that will be fun for you that you can focus on while I'm on the phone?"

- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:34:55](#) You get them set up and then you say, "What if you get worried when I'm on the phone? You could come over to me and you could hold my hand while I'm on the phone or you could come and you could tap my knee and I will ruffle your hair. Will that help you feel better?" You come up with basically a code language so they can talk to you while you're on the phone. It's a famous thing that Maria Montessori actually said which is, "Don't try to control the child. Control the environment so the child can thrive." So you're setting up the situation when you're on the phone so that a child is less likely to have a problem.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:35:30](#) But let's say you're on the phone. He forgets everything. He's totally panicked that you're on the phone and he says, "Mom, mom, mom, mom." And you're on the phone. At this point you put your person on hold, whoever you're talking to and you stop. You say, "Hey, Sweetheart. I see you're worried and you really want me to talk to you. I'm on the phone. We talked about this. I'm going to give you a hug and you need to go do X. What can you do to take care of **you** right now?" And you send your kid off, right? That's the way you set a limit.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:36:02](#) I'm hearing you say that you're permissive and you don't know how to set limits. The basic way to set limits is you empathize with the child. "I see you're anxious. I see you want my attention right now, whatever. You really are having a great time getting the food out of the fridge, whatever." Then you set the limit. "I need the food a little faster because we have to hurry and get dinner going. We're late and we need to get it on the table or whatever. Everybody's so hungry." So you set that limit and then you tell the child what they can do instead. "But you could get out all the vegetables as long as you give me the tofu or chicken right now and I can start working on that. That would be great."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [00:36:47](#) Or if you're on the phone. "You really want my attention. As soon as I'm off the call I will listen to your question, you can ask me your question. Until then, what can you do?" You redirect. It's very hard to stop an impulse. What you can do is redirect it. "Can you make me a picture while I'm finishing up my phone call of what you're trying to tell me?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:37:11](#) I hope that's helpful in learning how to set limits. I think that some people assume that setting limits is somehow going to make your child magically do everything you say. I don't think that's ever the case. I think children will have their needs and they will push your limits but it's your job to hold the limit and to try to find a way to redirect what the child is asking. I hope that's helpful.

Question 10:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:37:37](#) Next question is from a parent who says, "We're struggling with choices and consequences, the consequences of those choices, with our two-year-old. He wants autonomy so we try to give choices we can live with but he ends up frustrated and whining about his choice."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:37:51](#) A two-year-old doesn't have a prefrontal cortex. He's still learning so when he makes a choice, sometimes he realizes that he really didn't want that. He wanted something else. That's a learning process and it's not always a pleasant one for any of us. I would add there's nothing wrong with kids encountering disappointment and learning they can make it through and make a different choice next time. I would add that learning that lesson is facilitated when you describe to him what will happen when he makes the choice, which it sounds like you're doing. And also empathizing when he realizes he made the wrong choice. "Oh, you wish you had turned off the light. I asked you do you want to turn off the light or should I and you said I should, but now you're so sad you wish you had done it."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:38:38](#) Just stating for him what actually happened and how he's feeling will really help him put two and two together. It helps integrate the two sides of the brain so that the logical side and the feeling side have the full story, both of them, and can see, "Oh, that's how we ended up in this problem."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:38:58](#) The other thing to keep in mind in these situations is that sometimes when a child acts like this, they just need to cry. They seize on something, anything, that must be the problem. "I wanted to turn out the light." And if you say

yes to that and let him go over and turn the light back on again and then off again, he might be fine. In which case, who cares, that's okay. It was something that turned out to be really important to him and he learned a lesson about it and he'll never make that mistake again. But most likely, I'd say 80% of the time that won't happen. Most likely if you let him go do the light, what will happen is within a few minutes, he'll be whining about something else.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:39:36](#) "I wanted to sing a song." "You read an extra book instead of singing a song. Well, sweetheart, we gave you a choice." Of course, you don't say that. We say, "You wish you had chosen a song instead, right?" But because this is now a second thing he's whining about, you know it's a full backpack issue and what he needs is to cry. At that point you just empathize. "Oh, you wish you had chosen the song." And you stay patient and you create safety and his anger melts into grief and he begins to cry.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:40:06](#) I suspect this is age appropriate, learning to live with your choices, but much more. It's an expression of needing to cry. And it's a good time to encourage the crying. You'll get a lot less whining.

Parent: [00:40:21](#) So we have a three-year-old daughter. She's our only daughter. She's really assertive. She's really advanced. We Montessori. We've been practicing a lot of what you advocate and teach by accident since she was born. We still struggle a lot. Our biggest question is what's reasonable in terms of expectations? This morning we were trying to get her ready for school and it was really obvious that she didn't want to go. I was really empathetic with her. I asked her if she wanted to snuggle. We snuggled for a while. We read a book. I asked her if she could tell me what she had to do to get ready for school. She was able to repeat to me her routine that she goes through to get ready for school. I told her that I loved her and that I knew that she wanted to stay home but that we had to go to school and we could pick out a book together so that we could read it after school.

Parent: [00:41:25](#) She was totally not into it. I get it, right? Sometimes adults don't want to go to work. She started to get up to get

dressed and I set out a couple of different things for her. She said she wanted to wear something different. It wasn't a play outfit or anything so, of course, I told her yes. But she got distracted again and she ran to her table and she grabbed a coloring book and she was coloring. And, of course, I said to her, "You really love to color. I see that you want to color." I said, "I know it's hard to get ready for school sometimes but we really need to go." She didn't really respond. She kept coloring. I sat with her for a couple of minutes and then I finally said to her, "It's really time to go to school. I know it's really hard for you to stop. Do you want to put your things away on the table so that you can color after school or should mommy help you put them away?"

Parent: [00:42:24](#) So she decided that she was going to put them away on the table for later. She put her pencils and her coloring book on the table and she went in to get dressed again but she just didn't want to. So this went on and on and on. And then finally she got ready and got in the car but it was such a struggle. I mean, I can say we've never yelled at her. I mean, she's three. We've really never even disciplined her for anything. We've never used timeouts or anything like that. We actually took another positive discipline class through Jane Nelson. We took that one first with our Montessori school.

Parent: [00:43:12](#) So, this was an hour. The last thing I said to her to try to encourage her to go to school was they do recess first and she likes to go to recess. So I said to her, "Oh my goodness. Look what time it is." We have a small little clock on the wall for her, so we can point her to it and talk about time. She does struggle. I will say it seems like transitions are hard for her. We were running a half an hour late and I said to her, "Recess is now and I know you really like to be outside with all your friends." I said to her, "We're running late. I'm not sure how much recess time is left." And I said, "Do you think you'll be sad if we get there and recess is over." That still wasn't even motivating for her.

Parent: [00:44:00](#) So after all this, she finally just went and brushed her teeth and washed her face and we got in the car. I could tell she didn't want to go. Like I said, I understand it because even adults sometimes don't want to get up and go to work. But

I really practice breathing and all that. I'm getting somewhat of a handle on it. I'm not getting annoyed at her or talking to her in an annoyed way or anything. I just think, "Jeez."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:44:34](#)

Okay. I think what happens with a lot of parents, especially when they're trying hard to be peaceful parents, is they don't know what to do. They feel powerless when their child pushes the limit and ignores the limit and goes off to color when they're supposed to put their clothes on. I would say the answer is, you're with her at that moment, right? You're helping her mobilize to get out of the house. Because you don't expect a three-year-old to just go off and get themselves ready, you do expect to need to stay with them. But if they're at that point running off to color, you clearly set a limit. "I know you wish you could color and it's time to get ready to go. Come on. Which of these outfits are you going to wear, or are we going to bring them both in the car? Because now it's time to get in the car."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:45:17](#)

So you wouldn't have the half an hour too late thing. It would be like, "Okay, we need to get in the car." At that point, if she cries, that is okay. I would pick her up and settle her and say, "I know that feeling. It feels like it's just too much to get ready for school right now, doesn't it? Don't worry. We'll bring the clothes in the car and you can get dressed once we get there. We'll bring both outfits. Let's go." And that's that.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:45:44](#)

There's no question of sitting next to her while she colors and, "Do you want to put the coloring here or there to get ready for later" or any of that stuff. If she's already had that connection time and she's just trying to see whether she could push this off a little longer by coloring more, then it's your job to say, "Okay, I'm the leader here. This is the end of this interaction. We're going to go ahead and keep our timetable."

Parent: [00:46:08](#)

So sometimes I will say, "Do you want to walk or should I carry you?" I guess I worry about pushing up against that limit where I'm physically helping her along. I worry that I shouldn't be doing that.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:46:25](#)

I would just say when possible you want to enroll her cooperation. But sometimes with a two-year-old and even a three-year-old, less likely when she gets older, you do need to pick them up and move them sometimes. I think that what you're really doing is you're trying very hard to acknowledge her. There's nothing wrong with doing that. You're not doing something wrong by letting her push the limit and then you say, "No, no, no. We're not going to color right now." Let's handle this in a really patient manner. There's nothing wrong with that but there will be a point where she will just continue. She's a smart kid. She's just going to come up with one thing after another to do.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:08](#)

And you could spend the entire morning at home with her coming up with one more thing that she gets interested in doing. As it happens, you were only running a half an hour late with her. But I'm just saying, she's an ingenious kid. It could go on for an hour. It could go on for two hours, right? There is some point where you need to put your foot down. I don't think picking her up usually is the first part of that. I think looking her in the eye and saying, "I know you would rather do anything besides get in the car. And now we're going to the car. Are you going to walk or am I going to carry you? Which would you prefer?" You can do that, but I think before you even offer that, you can go on with the next part of the routine. Like, "Let's find your shoes. Let's say goodbye to your stuffed rabbit," or whatever your routine usually is.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:47:58](#)

Routines are the way you get kids out of the door in the morning. "No, no, no. Coloring isn't something we do in the morning. We do that when we get home later. In the morning, we do this, this, and this, right? Let's go." I guess I'm encouraging you and everyone listening to this, when you're trying to move a child through the routine and they don't want to do what you want to do, absolutely acknowledge it. Understand completely in your gut why they don't want to do this, which it sounds like you do. And then you're still the leader and sometimes you do have to set that limit. In a worse case scenario you pick them up. But that shouldn't be happening every morning.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:48:33](#) But if she knows that's a violation, that you don't push it past that point on the clock or you will have to be picked up and put in the car, then I think you'll find that she's going to start cooperating with you more. Right now she's just figuring out where the limits are and so far she's learned at least today that she can push them a half an hour and that's good. That to her meets her agenda. Maybe tomorrow she can do an hour, right? Kids learn by what we actually do with them.

Question 11:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:49:02](#) A parent asked about tone of voice. "Is it okay to have a more serious tone of voice when you or your child are getting close to the limit? My 32-month-old son often ignores me when I ask gently." I would say absolutely. You want to be clear and forceful. But that doesn't mean to have a threatening tone. I don't know. You'll have to evaluate for yourself and see what your normal tone of voice is, right? But you've heard the kinds of voices I use. I think in this parent's example, she said that he didn't want to brush his teeth. She asked if he wanted to brush his teeth in the bath or later on after the bath on the steps, and he ignored her. And she said, "Okay, if you're not listening to me, I'll have to make the decisions."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:49:55](#) I would just say if he's ignoring you, you move in close, you touch his arm, and you say, "Excuse me. Are you ignoring me? Mr. Toothbrush has to tell you something. We're going to brush right now unless you want to brush after the bath on the step. Which one?" This parent said that even when she touched her son's arm and repeated herself and even made the question simpler, he would still ignore her but that if she raised her voice and said in a less friendly tone, "We'll brush your teeth in the bath and mommy will do it." Then he would promptly sit down and take the brush and clean his own teeth.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:50:29](#) I would say you don't have to be threatening for that. You just have to be really clear that you're not going to vanish here. You're not going away. Ignoring you doesn't work. Remember every young child is a researcher, an explorer, an experimenter. They're trying to figure out how the

world works. They've got you pegged by the time they're 12 months old. They pretty much know whether you'll come through for them when they're upset, whether you can handle it when they're angry at you. They know if you'll just sigh and say, "All right, get in the tub. We'll brush the teeth later." Which is not what I would ever advise doing. Once you've broached the subject, you need to get in their face in a friendly way.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:51:12](#)

When you're asking about tone, I'm going to demonstrate this for you. I would say, "Whoa, whoa. Sweetheart. Right here, mom, talking to you. Teeth brushing. Here's the toothbrush. Now or after the bath?" I would be totally just like that. That's a loud, firm voice. No kid is going to learn that he can just ignore you. But I wasn't saying, "You're not listening to me." I don't think you ever need to go there. Loud and firm but not threatening, I would say.

Question 12:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:51:48](#)

This is from a parent who said that a few months ago her three-year-old started shouting very loudly at her whenever she would say no to him and he would yell, "I want that. I want that." She doesn't want him to think it's okay to shout at people so she wasn't sure what to do. Although, it's actually improved, she says, more recently.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:52:13](#)

I would say that it's probably improved because your three-year-old feels heard more, because you've been using the teachings from this course and he isn't as desperate. People shout when they want to be heard. Children are more likely to shout at us when they're not really sure that anybody's going to listen and take care of what they're asking. You've now been taking this course for a few months and it may well be that your son feels safer now. Yes, he's made developmental progress. He's grown and he's older and wiser, maybe. But also you've probably grown wiser and more empathetic. I'm betting that is part of what has changed for him.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:52:59](#)

I don't think for parents who are dealing with this that you should say, "Oh, I don't want to be shouted at. I'm going to go into another room." I don't think that's the appropriate

thing to do because I think the child feels less heard when you do that, less likely to feel heard. It's only going to increase the likelihood that they're going to shout at you. So, do I think you deserve to be shouted at? Absolutely not, not by anybody. And I think that most of us got shouted at when we were children and so it pushes our buttons when our three-year-old or anyone else shouts at us. It makes us reactive.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:53:39](#)

But this is where regulating our own emotions and working on our own issues comes into play, because we don't have to get triggered. He's three. He's not victimizing you. He's expressing his needs as best as he can. The more sure he is that you're going to listen and meet his needs, the less he's going to shout. You can nip this in the bud by listening harder rather than walking away. I'm saying that for this parent but I'm also saying it for anybody else. The question, "How do you set a limit?" You can say at that moment when he's shouting, "Ouch. That's a loud voice. You really want me to hear, don't you?" And you lower your voice a little bit and you say, "Tell me, sweetie. Tell me what you need. I can help." Now if he's shouting because you set a limit and he doesn't like the limit, then you empathize with that. "You really don't like that I said no. You really wish you could have it. I know, Sweetheart." Because at that point what's operating is his desperation and his desolation that you've set this limit. And if he's only three, he's going to burst into tears at some point that you've said, "No, we really can't do that."

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:54:52](#)

And he will shout as his defense against that. It's like any other anger. Your job is to create safety. And again, walking away doesn't create the safety, empathy does.

Question 13:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:55:03](#)

How to correct when kids are ashamed? This is about a three and a half- year-old who's recently starting to run away to hide when he does something he knows is wrong. When the parents say, "What happened, Sweetie?" He says, "Go away. Don't talk to me." I think you can't ask him questions when he's in that state. You have to know him. He knows hitting is wrong. What he needs now is

your empathy about why he did it and your help to figure out what he could do instead in that moment and your reassurance that you don't think he's a bad person. He won't always hit like this. It's because he's little.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:55:45](#) It's really important that kids know that. They're not doing these things because they're bad people. They're doing these things because, in this case, he's three. I think if we want a child who can be open to our influence and our corrections, we have to start in those moments where he's ashamed. We have to start by connecting with him. In this case, if he's run away, you might go close to him and he'll yell, "Go away." You can say, "You're so upset, Sweetie." Now if he's hit somebody like a sibling, you're taking care of the sibling. You're not over here with him.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:56:20](#) But I'm just going to assume that he hit you and ran away. So there's no one to take care of in this moment except yourself, so you're not furious and then you go up to him and you say, "Sweetheart, you're so upset. I know that's why you hit me. I guess you were mad when I said X, Y, Z. I'm so sorry you were so upset, Sweetie. It's never okay to hit. And it did hurt, ouch. But you know what? I'm okay. I'm right here with a hug when you're ready." And at that point, he may not be ready then but he'll crawl out soon into your arms hopefully and get a hug. If you're doing enough preventive maintenance, that's how it should go.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:57:06](#) At that point you say to him, "You were so mad. You really wanted a cookie and I said no. I know, Sweetie. You were so mad. You didn't know what to do, right? And you even hit me, didn't you? Yeah. No hitting. Hitting hurts. Next time what could you do when you're really, really, really mad at me? What could you do?" And if you do it in that kind of a voice, he's probably going to be more open to feeling like you're not scolding him but you're supporting him to figure out another way to do it. You're partnering with him. At that point you regain your influence with him. That's always your goal.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:57:47](#) Okay. So that's limit setting. I hope that's clear. I do find that limit setting is where most people run into problems and it's because of our own emotions. So you always go back to the first thing. There are three parts of peaceful

parenting, right? The first thing is to regulate your own emotions. Once you do that, then you go to the second thing, connect with your kid. See it from their point of view. When you can do those two things, you will find it's not nearly so hard to set empathetic limits. And the third thing, which is coaching, includes empathetic limits and so you simply say, "Here's the limit. No hitting. Hitting hurts," for instance, or whatever your limit is. "No cookie." You acknowledge why he wanted it or why he acted out just now and hit, what problem he was trying to solve, what feeling he was trying to express.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:58:37](#)

And then if emotions are high, you help him work through those emotions. And if they're already basically worked through, then you can just say what he could do instead. If in fact the emotions have been worked through, he's going to be able to hear you when you help him see what he could do instead. As long as you have a strong relationship, they're open to our influence and that's really all you can ever do. You can't really control another person.

Question 14:

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:59:06](#)

I love this question about a two-year-old. This parent describes her two-year-old and she says, "He constantly, impulsively does things like pouring his cereal on the floor, dumping his milk, putting his toothbrush in the toilet, putting his favorite cuddly toy in the bath, turning on the washing machine or dryer. He loves emptying. Today he emptied a whole box of cereal on the floor at my sister's house." I'm just laughing. Yes. That's the perfect description of a toddler. Toddlers are scientists. They're engaging with the world. That's why we don't expect them to stay out of the road.

Dr. Laura Markham: [00:59:39](#)

They're not going to remember to stay out of the road. Even if they remember **we told them** to stay out of the road, which they probably won't. When they want to run

into the road, they're not going to be able to stop themselves when they see the flower across the road or their ball rolls into the road. They don't have the prefrontal cortex to stop themselves and therefore they run into the road, which is why we use fences. That's why we baby-proof the house. If you have a climber, that's why you bolt your TV up to the wall or you bolt your bookcase to the wall. You make sure nothing can fall on your climber.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:00:11](#)

I just think in general he has to develop the prefrontal cortex or he can't stop himself. Toddlers do start to get that. I'm thinking of the toddler I knew who would say, "Don't hit the doggy. No. No hit doggy. Bad." But he'd be hitting the doggy while he did it. Even when they start to understand what they're not supposed to do, they still can't stop themselves from doing it. But that's the beginning of the prefrontal cortex, of the override of the cortex, of the conscience you might even think. The override of the conscience is coming in.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:00:44](#)

But remember, they only develop that override when we have said it to them in a nice voice so they can hear it. If we say to them angrily, then they're in flight, fight, or freeze and they're ready to fight back and they're not taking it in and learning it and adopting it. So they'll be quicker to develop that conscience, that override, if we are calm as we set limits. That connection with us is what's going to motivate them to rein themselves in, to choose to go with our limit instead of their natural curiosity about things.

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

I think you're doing great. When she said she tells him that cereal is for eating and when he's done he should tell her and she'll help him put it in the food bin. He then will help her clear up the cereal afterwards. And she lets him push the buttons on the washing machine when she needs to do a wash and all that. That's beautiful. That's perfect. You asked what I would say. I would say just what you're saying. "Oops. Now the toothbrush has germs. It was in the toilet. Oh, no. We can't flush that. Let's fish it out. Oh, yuck. This has germs on it now. It can't go on our body. Throw it away. That's too bad. Toothbrushes cost money.

That was a beautiful blue toothbrush. Oh, no. Bye-bye toothbrush. Okay. No toothbrushes in the toilet, right?"

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

But notice that's how he learns. He's staying with you while you're teaching the lesson. If we tried to punish him, forget it. He would be behind your back putting everything he could find into the toilet.

Question 15:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:02:15](#)

There's a question here about a toddler running away when you're out in public. Not surprisingly this parent has a baby in the baby carrier so has a hard time chasing after the two-year-old and picking her up. I would like to say first, this is what two-year-olds do. They have no idea that they could be hit by a car and killed. They just don't have the mental faculties yet to get this. And they also don't understand they could get lost or abducted. They just don't get it. It's our job to keep them safe. And yet, it's their job to explore the world and to delight in their power and that means they're going to run away from us.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:02:53](#)

It's sort of like throwing. Two-year-olds love to throw things. They throw when they're happy. They throw when they're mad. You can expect two-year-olds to throw things. Two-year-olds run away from you. They run away when they're happy. They run away when they're mad and we can expect that. I would say, first of all, give your child a safe way to run away. Whenever you can, whether it's in a hallway of your home or out in a fenced yard or fenced playground, play a chase game with your child where they run away from you and you lament that you can't catch them because they're so fast.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:03:25](#)

If your child likes to be caught, grab your child and throw them around. "I will always come to you. I will always find you no matter what. I love you so much." But then let them get away again and say, "Oh, she escaped again. She is so fast. She gets away every time." Your child will laugh and laugh and laugh and they'll feel invincible and they'll also feel, "Mommy or daddy loves me and they always come after me. I can relax. I'm safe." That's the way to deal with a child who runs away. Often it's enough.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:03:58](#) If you did that every day, you would find your child doesn't need to run away during the other times. And you have the conversation. "We can run away here, we can't run away when we're at the mall or in the parking lot or whatever. Then you have to hold my hand." And I would have that conversation with your child and if you find they're still running away and you really can't hold their hand, then they always have to be belted into a stroller or they always have to be belted into a shopping cart.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:04:23](#) If you have a child who can't handle that, I'm not above leashes. I know most people hate leashes. There's a lot of parents shaming online about parents who use leashes for their child. Obviously I don't think we should be thinking of our children as dogs that we have to leash. But there's a brief period of time where you have a baby and you have a toddler and the toddler does not get that they can't run away and you're doing your very best to on a daily basis let them run away from you in a game in a safe place -- and they're still running away when you're out in New York City trying to cross the street, then you actually do need a leash so that you can not lose your child and not have them get killed. That's your job as a parent.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:05:05](#) You just have to put a little protective white light around you and your child, a bubble, that says, "You can be as critical as you want, people watching me, but I'm protecting my child. This is what I need to do for her right now and it's better for her than if I hold her by the hand, which makes her feel powerless and then she runs away more." And that's what you do. It won't last forever. It's a very short time period. And make sure during that time that you're not treating your kid as a dog on a leash but you're instead relating to her constantly. But she feels it as an empowering thing. And children do. I've seen many children use these leashes as a way to have a little more distance so they don't just feel they have to hold your hand only and they can have a little distance.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:05:44](#) Personally, I prefer the stroller but some kids hate being locked down in a stroller and I totally understand that. There are ways that you can work with each developmental stage and that's a way that you can work

with the developmental stage of a toddler, which you can expect to run away.

Question 16:

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

How to help a toddler wait patiently while you're busy in the middle of something. I tell her I'll be X more minutes until I'm done and then I can help her and then she'll stand next to me and whine and cry until I'm finished. I think that's all she can do. I think that's her developmental level. She's a three and a half-year-old. You need to get her busy doing something and you need to say, "You know what, Sweetie? It's going to take me another five minutes to finish this. Do you want to help me do this and then I can help you with what you want?" Or you can say, "You know what? It's going to take me another five minutes. Let me help you real quick to get started and then I can finish this and then I'll come back to you."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:06:38](#)

Notice none of this is, "You need to wait longer." She's going to stand next to you and whine and cry because she doesn't really trust that you're going to be there to meet her needs and her needs are not being met. Remember, the more responsive we are, the less they whine and cry. Responsive would mean you say, "Oh, you're having such a hard time waiting. It's too hard to wait right now, huh? Okay. Let me help you get started with that and then I'll come back and finish this." Or, "Can you help me with this so I can finish sooner?" And if that's not possible, you can say, "Hmm, I have to finish this but you want me to do this with you. What are we going to do to solve this? I know. You want to get in the backpack on my back while I finish putting the dinner in the oven?" Find a solution that works for both of you. This is just about what's age appropriate.

Question 17:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:07:20](#)

A parent is asking, "I have a 19-month-old son who is speech delayed, throws tantrums several times daily especially about sleep. He throws his head back and screams when he can't walk on the table or pull the cat's tail." So, 19 months is the hardest point in parenting

because they have no idea why everything they want to do is being thwarted and they have no frustration tolerance. Your goal is to keep a good relationship with him even as you set these limits so that as he gradually gains the ability to manage himself a little better, he'll also be motivated to manage himself a little better because of your relationship.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:07:54](#)

And I would reframe here. It's okay that he has several tantrums a day. Stay empathetic. Use your words to affirm what he wants and how frustrated he is not to get it. That's okay. Tantrums are nature's way of helping children let off steam. It's totally fine if you've done everything you can and he's having a tantrum. Keep setting the limits. They are important. You can't let him hit the cat. Let go of any other limits that you can, to minimize the number of times daily that you're asking him to tolerate so much frustration.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:08:24](#)

As far as sleep goes, that's not unusual at this age. He sounds like the kind of guy who wants to stay in motion. You may need to change your bedtime and nap practices now that he likes to stay in motion. Be sure he has a routine so he knows what to expect. That would be less frustrating for him. Expect him to protest anyway. Please read the toddler sleep section on the Aha! Parenting website. There's a letter on the website from a mother of an 18-month-old who refuses to nap. We talk about how he needed to laugh and he needed to cry and when she got him laughing and then crying, he started to nap again. Please read that letter. I think it sounds like your son.

Question 18:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:09:06](#)

A parent says, "I never intentionally punish my kids but maybe I've been inadvertently threatening my son. He can ride his trike in the house but if he runs into the dog, he has to stop and we put the trike away until he's ready to ride safely. If he's riding close to the dog, I might say, "Remember, if you run into the dog, you have to stop riding." Now he makes threats to me. This is a great

insight. Yes, you are just enforcing your limit. I know that. But it can feel like a punishment depending on your attitude.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:09:32](#)

What's your goal here? Your goal is to give him enough support to be successful. The warnings are not really helpful support, I think. Instead of a warning like, "Remember, you have to stop riding." You might do something completely different. If you see he's riding and he's getting close to the dog, you might intervene by going over to the dog and saying, "Oh my goodness. That was scary, huh? That tricycle came close to you. Oh, Sweetheart. It's okay. So and so, your child's name, wouldn't run into you." And you would say to him, "Doggy's a little scared. You're having fun with the tricycle, aren't you? What can we do to keep doggy safe so he doesn't get scared when you come over near this way?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:10:15](#)

So you're always his partner to teach him problem solving and being responsible and to set limits. But you don't ever have to threaten him. I think the threat is not going to come off as okay, and it's a punishment when you make him stop.

Question 19:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:10:33](#)

So our next problem is about whining. So this is specifically whining in response to limits. Whining is a symptom of powerlessness. Kids often whine not when you set a limit necessarily but simply when they encounter something they don't like. For example, the grocery store or anything that they don't like, bedtime. When kids whine, they need nurturing generally. So whining in response to limits isn't so different than that. It's a sign that your child needs something. That doesn't mean they need what they're asking for. This question is from a parent who said, "Should I ignore him when he asks over and over again for something I've set the limit about?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:11:12](#)

That doesn't exactly sound like whining, but I suppose if it's in that tone of voice, it's whining. It could certainly grate on you. You should not ignore him, because if you ignore him, it makes him feel more powerless. Instead,

respond to the need, right? He thinks he needs the cookie, for instance, and you said no. You're not going to give him the cookie but you are going to respond to the need that's making him beg you over and over again for that cookie, right? You're going to say no. You're going to go ahead and say no. But think of it this way, you're saying no but you're giving him yes energy.

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

There's a wonderful blogger, therapist on the west coast of the United States. His name is Scott Noelle. He does a lot of work with schools but he is also in private practice. Scott talks about yes energy a lot. I just love this idea that when you say no to your child, you can still use yes energy. "So no, I'm going to say no again, Sweetie. No cookies. It's too close to dinner. But yes, you know what you can have? You can have a hug from mommy. And you know what else you can have? Yes, yes, yes. You can have a glass of milk because there's a lot of good protein in it. You know what else you can have? Yes, yes, yes. You can climb right up here and help me because I'm getting the potatoes ready for dinner. I know you love potatoes."

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

That's yes energy. Even though you're saying no to what he wants, which is the cookie. What are you giving him instead? You're giving him the yes energy. You're giving him something to eat because he's hungry. You're giving him a way to focus on dinner and distract himself from his maybe hunger pains at that moment. And you're giving him your attention and your connection, which is a cure-all for most of what ails children. When he whines, I know that what you feel like is running in the other direction. I know you feel like saying, "If you can't talk nicely, I don't want to hear it. I can't hear you. Your words don't come to my ears when you talk that way." But actually, that just creates more whining and more powerlessness in your child. If instead you can respond to the real need under the behavior, you'll find that the behavior will change.

Question 20:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:13:34](#)

Our next question is from a parent who says, "When we're in public or anyone else is around, my three-year-old runs away, does attention seeking behavior, pushes all the

limits, does not listen to me even when I connect before I correct, do preventative maintenance with special time every day, and calmly talk about expectations before we go someplace or have someone over." This is scary and you're doing so many things right. It's great you're doing special time. It's great you're doing other preventative maintenance. It's great that you talk about expectations before you go out with her.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:14:07](#)

I don't hear roughhousing, though, and that would be really important, especially for a child who gets a little anxious, because roughhousing helps with anxiety. I think she gets overstimulated and she loses her connection with you. Anxiety will do that. And she stops taking direction from you. You say that she exhibits attention seeking behavior, though, and that sounds like she's asking you for attention. She's acting up to get your attention. That would imply your attention maybe is directed elsewhere? I know you also have a 14-month-old. I wonder if when you're going out and you have the 14-month-old also and you're focused on grocery shopping or whatever else you're doing when you're out, that she feels like your attention is elsewhere and she feels a little unsafe, overstimulated by the surroundings and like you're not really there fully for her.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:15:06](#)

It might be that. That would again be anxiety if that's the case. I'm getting that from when you say attention seeking behavior. If that's what's going on, she'll do anything to get your attention even if it means misbehaving. If that's the case, you'll need to do a couple of things. One is try to find some new ways to maintain connection like holding hands with her when you're in public. Just make that rule that whenever you're out in public with her, you two hold hands. It wouldn't hurt if she actually runs away from you frequently to have a way, a ribbon or something that ties you together, not as a leash, but as a way to bless your connection so that you say, "This is a blessing for our connection and if you need me, you just pull on this ribbon and I'll be right there and I'll know you need me and I will look at you even if I'm talking to the grocery store clerk or whatever."

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:16:08](#) So that could really help her feel like you're available to her. And it would also make you feel a little bit reassured that she's not going to go running off from you. And in fact, the way you present this ribbon is it's a gift to her. You're not doing it to control her. You're giving this to her as a special way to signal you. Your special, secret signal, right?
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:16:31](#) Another thing you can do, because you did frame this beautifully. You said, "How do I maintain connection with her?" You're doing such a good job building connection the rest of the time, but then she loses that connection when she goes out, getting overstimulated, getting overwhelmed probably. That's where roughhousing could be really helpful. If you do roughhousing and laughter with her before you go out, she'll be in a good mood. She'll be more likely to take direction from you. She'll feel connected to you. And most important of all, she won't be carrying a backlog of anxiety or fear or sadness or anything else that she might have been carrying around, because she'll have worked that out through roughhousing.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:17:14](#) And that way, when you go out, she's more able to stay connected, more able to listen to you. The new anxiety of being overstimulated by the surroundings won't overload her system because the roughhousing will have siphoned off the top layer of stuff in the emotional backpack. And what do I mean when I keep saying she's getting overstimulated? She's probably a highly sensitive person who is very aware of all of the stimuli coming in when she leaves the house, all of the noises and the sights and the smells, the people, whatever it is in the store, on the park, on the playground.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:17:58](#) So she gets a little overwhelmed by so much sensory input. I don't know if this is a child who has some other sensory issues but I think it's very likely. I would pay attention to that and see if you see that operating in other areas of her life when she's at home. But even if it's only just when she leaves the house, that's not infrequent for kids to feel safe at home but then a little overwhelmed by anxiety when they leave the house, even if they don't have sensory issues. Again, anything you can do to frequently reconnect with her, and that means very frequently

getting down on her level, hugging her, telling her you love her, you're there for her, acknowledging her experience, what she seems to be feeling at that moment or expressing at that moment. Anything you can do to actually build connection.

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

I know that's hard. You'll have a 14-month-old also. I assume with a 14-month-old, you're wearing that child because that is the best way to handle a 14-month-old is to wear them, often on your back or in a sling on your front side. That leaves your hands free to hold hands with the older child. It also leaves your attention a little more free to be able to notice her and validate her even while you're also present for your 14-month-old.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:19:24](#)

And you can see how all of this would also apply when someone comes over to your house, meaning wearing the 14-month-old so you can have a little extra attention left for the older child and even though your attention does have to go toward the visitor, making sure that you have some attention left for the older child, and that way they don't have to act out to get your attention. I hope this helps.

Question 21:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:19:54](#)

The next question is from a parent who says, "I've noticed that one of my triggers is getting ignored and I have to repeat my request over and over again with no response from my daughter who's three. I feel like I'm talking to the wall and I get frustrated and raise my voice. Any advice when she's choosing to ignore me?" Well, first of all, I would say don't repeat yourself. Get in her face in a friendly way. Your daughter is, by the way, not necessarily choosing to ignore you. It's actually normal for kids to lose themselves in whatever they're focusing on and not hear us.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:20:26](#)

It's your assumption that she's choosing to ignore you and I think that assumption is actually part of what's triggering you here. Wouldn't you have a different reaction if you

believed that she actually couldn't hear you, didn't hear you? And it might be that she doesn't hear you. Don't repeat yourself. Get in her face. Repeat yourself kindly when she's paying attention to you. If you need more support on this particular question, there's an article on the Aha! Parenting website, "How To Get Your Child To Listen", that I think will be very helpful to you.

Question 22:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:20:59](#)

Our next question is from a parent who says, "My two-year-old is doing better now expressing himself with words rather than physical force, but his words are hurtful and disrespectful toward others. So empathize. Give him more appropriate words. So when he says, "You poopie head, I hate you." That's disrespectful, that's true. You can say, "You're mad at X," let's say his friend at the playground or his father. If you're talking about his friend, "You're mad at your friend. You want your friend to give you a turn. You can tell your friend, 'I want a turn too, please.' Name calling hurts." You can give him that information, name calling hurts.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:21:40](#)

"You're so mad you feel like calling names, but what you really want is a turn. Say 'I want a turn too, please.'" Once your son knows he can get his needs met without attacking the other person, he'll stop attacking.

Question 23:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:21:54](#)

A parent is asking, "How do I handle my three-year-old's behavior when she's defiant and purposefully trying to be naughty? I ignore her when possible but when she's throwing things that almost hit baby sister's head, then I have to get involved. She throws things, hits me, dumps the dog food on the floor, throws the pillows off the couch, basically runs around trying to find the thing that

will set me off. By the way, we do special time twice a day."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:22:17](#)

So first of all, I never recommend ignoring bad behavior. I think children do that for a reason and if we ignore the bad behavior, it just escalates. In this case, I think your special time is fantastic twice a day. That's so great. And it's having the desired effect. Your daughter is feeling safe and close to you so those feelings of unhappiness that she has to share with her sister and maybe also about past punishments or shouting or whatever are coming up to get healed because she feels safe because of the special time.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:22:51](#)

But those feelings don't feel good to her. They feel awful so she wants to avoid them and the best defense is a good offense. She is provoking you on purpose. I'm hoping you understand what I'm saying here. What happens when the emotional backpack is full and the child feels safe is the feelings come up to get healed. But that doesn't feel good, so often kids will engage in provocative behavior, as you said, basically run around trying to find whatever thing is going to set you off.

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

Why would they do that? They'd rather start a fight with you than feel those emotions. So if she successfully starts a fight with you, what's going to happen is the feelings are no longer safe and they'll get stuffed because, of course, she's mobilized for fight or flight at that point. So it's not a safe time to process feelings, so they get restuffed. That's what she's trying to do. Your job is to stop the behavior calmly, kindly, and get her crying by empathizing about how hard everything is. "No, Sweetie. You can't dump the dog food. Uh, uh, uh. Now we need to pick that up again. I know you wish you could. It's so hard, isn't it?" And then if she keeps doing stuff, grab her up, hold her. "I know. You're having a really hard time. I'm saying no. We're not playing now."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:24:16](#)

If you're firm, she'll give up pushing and that really matters because that's when she's able to get to her tears. When pushing is not going to get her anywhere, then resistance is futile. In fact, "tears of futility" is what Gordon Neufeld calls that. He wrote *Hold Onto Your Kids*. He calls that "tears of futility" when children bump up against a wall

that they can't get through. If she understands you're firm with your limit, she cannot do these things, but you're so kind that she still feels safe, then she'll simply cry because the feelings are there and if she's safe, the feelings will come up. That's what your daughter is telling you she needs to do.

Question 24:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:25:04](#) Our next question is from a parent who says, "I have three-year-old twin boys. I'm a single mom by choice. Lately one of the boys has started to scream a lot. He screams no, he screams answers when I ask him something, mostly in public and some at home. But I've heard this happening also at school. The other twin is quiet while this is happening. What's the best way to have him talk in a normal voice?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:25:25](#) When you say that this has started to happen recently, I'm wondering if it's started since you started this course? If that's the case, this is a backpack issue. This is him starting to surface stuff and he's feeling the stuff coming up that he's been stuffing all this time and he is trying to make it go down and he's feeling overwhelmed by the feelings and so what's coming up is shouting.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:25:53](#) It's also possible that something is stressing him. So if it isn't the backpack then there's something else in his life that's new, since this is a recent thing, that is stressing him. Maybe there's a recent change in his life. I hear that his twin is quiet when this happens but his twin could have exactly the same feelings but he's handling them differently for exactly the same stressor. Or maybe he has no stressor. Maybe it's just this one child who has a stressor.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:26:21](#) We don't really know what's going on with him but something is upsetting him. I would empathize and when it happens, I would talk him down. "You're screaming. You're upset. It's okay, Sweetheart. We can handle this. Normal voice, honey, so I can hear you and help you." I

wouldn't be correcting, I would be connecting. And I think you'll find that over time as he realizes that his needs are in fact going to be met, he'll stop doing this.

Question 25:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:26:54](#)

This parent is asking, "Often when my son, who's three and a half, is upset -- something doesn't work out as he wishes or he drops a bowl of his favorite snack or we set a limit about something -- he'll get mad and yell. We support him through this and he eventually moves on to expressing his anger by saying, 'Next time I will cut you up into little pieces and throw you in the garbage' or some variation of that. We've been nodding our heads and saying, 'I understand you're really upset.' But as the language escalates, I'm wondering whether we should be expressing that the words he chooses can hurt?"

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:27:24](#)

I think you're right on target there. I think it's great that your three-year-old has moved from yelling to angry words. Yes, I would acknowledge the violence in his words. He is three and a half now. I would say, "Ouch" and I might echo the words to help him see what he's saying. "Wow. You want to cut me up into little pieces and throw me in the garbage? You must really be upset. That would hurt." Of course, I wouldn't take the attack personally and I wouldn't even see it as hurtful. I don't think it's hurtful words. It's more that you want to draw attention to the fact that he's resorting to words like this to show you how angry he is and you want to speak to the anger, obviously.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:28:04](#)

What you've already been doing has really worked, that he has gotten better and moved from yelling to angry words. But I would also say if he makes a personal attack, be clear that your love is unconditional. "You're so mad right now that you don't even want me to be your mama? Ouch. That hurts. But I will always love you no matter how mad you are. I have enough love for both of us."

Question 26:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:28:34](#) This parent is asking, "Our three-year-old is stubborn and opinionated, and often rejects what anyone else says. Examples like, 'No, this is not a garbage truck, it's a dump truck' or 'No, it didn't hurt you when I accidentally jumped on top of you' or 'No, it's not dark outside.' We usually just shrug it off but he will adamantly bring up the point of disagreement again and again, even correcting others to assert his own wrong statement. Sometimes he will disobey a request while verbally arguing but other times he'll physically comply while verbally disagreeing."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:29:04](#) So, this is a strong-willed child who needs to save face and that's okay. You can let him save face. You don't have to prove he's wrong. This isn't going to last forever. Just keep a sense of humor about it so when he says things like, "No, it's not dark outside," just say, "It's not dark outside? Hmm, you must have x-ray vision." Or he says, "No, it's not dark." You say, "Really? Can you see things? Wow. I am impressed." It's like one of those "lies" that three and four-year-olds often tell where they just wish something was true. So that's fine. It's fine.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:29:40](#) But if he does say something that's about somebody else like, "No, it didn't hurt you when I accidentally jumped on top of you," I would say, "Oh, Sweetheart, I know you wish it didn't hurt me. I know that. You didn't mean to hurt me. It was an accident. I hear you. But everyone is in charge of their own body and my body says it hurts." And if he says, "No, it didn't hurt. Your body's wrong," you can say, "I know you wish it didn't hurt me." So "you wish" is a really good way to deal with this. It's sort of like this magical thinking that we often think of as lies, "you wish".

Question 27:

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:30:17](#) This parent's question is really about how to set limits while you're still empathizing with your child's whining. "Empathizing with whining feels like a reward. So when my three-year-old whines and I try to empathize while still sticking to the limits, it feels like it has increased her whining a lot, because now she gets my emotional empathy if she wants it. So it sounds like what's going on is you set a limit. No cookie. Your three-year-old whines. "I

want a cookie. I need a cookie." You say, "I hear you. You really wish you could have a cookie. No cookie now, sweetheart." She says, "But I want a cookie. I need a cookie." You say, "I hear how much you want a cookie. No cookie now, sweetheart." She whines again, "But I need a cookie."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:31:06](#)

And of course, you're thinking to yourself, "This is going to drive me crazy." If you had just said, "No cookie. No more whining," she would probably have stopped whining for the cookie. But since you're empathizing with how much she wants the cookie, maybe she's taking that as permission to keep asking for the cookie. She might even take it as a signal that you might give in and give her the cookie so she redoubles her efforts to try to get you to understand even though you're still sticking to your limit. At least, I think that's what you think is happening and it may well be happening.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:31:36](#)

But here's the thing. She's not just pushing on your limit asking again and again for what she wants. There are plenty of kids who do that and they're often strong-willed kids who come up with good arguments and try to get you to change your mind. That's not what she's doing. She's whining. And humans whine when they're overwhelmed, when they feel like they just don't have enough inner resources to cope with whatever the world is demanding from them. For kids that means they whine when we ask them to do something they don't feel up to or when we say no to them when they feel overwhelmed by big feelings and they desperately need to cry and they don't like that feeling so they go into fight, flight, or freeze.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:32:19](#)

Well, actually, if they're whining, they don't have enough gumption left inside to go into fight. But they beg for something that will help them escape into flight, usually screen or treats. If your daughter is whining in response to your limit, then either it's because she's too overwhelmed to do something you're asking or she's desperate for something that will shut down those feelings, a screen or a treat. Either way, what she needs is to cry but she isn't going to cry if she thinks you might give in on your limit.

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:32:50](#) It sounds like maybe she does think that based on your question. So she keeps whining against your limit. So even though she doesn't have the internal resources to mobilize into full fight mode, she is low level fight, pushing against you to get you to give in. So here's your game plan when this starts. First, be really clear and firm about your limit. "No, Sweetheart. No cookie now." Your goal is to create a very clear limit, even though you're being kind about it. When she hits that wall, we want her to give up and shift from fight, the sympathetic nervous system, to the parasympathetic nervous system. Remember, what happens then is a message is sent to the lacrimal glands of the eye so she begins to cry.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:33:37](#) It isn't really the crying we're going for, although that is a release, that is our signal that she's giving up the fight. To get her to do that, we need to create safety. This will help her to be willing to give up the fight that she thinks is keeping her safe. Do you know what I mean by that? The fight is keeping her safe from those feelings inside her. She doesn't want to cry. But if you can create safety and set a firm limit, she may be able to cry. You do this by extending empathy, but you shift out of the battle where she thinks she can talk you into the cookie.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:34:11](#) You know how that battle goes. "I need a cookie." "You wish you could have a cookie." Instead you address her deeper needs. "Oh my sweet baby. You are having such a hard time. No cookie. No cookie. No cookie. Everything feels so hard to you. Let me give you a big hug. Does that help? Good." So notice you're still empathizing but you're not stuck in the cookie debate. Now remember, your daughter's overwhelmed. She might not move right into tears though. So you give her a hug and then you help her learn a little more self regulation, self management, and self nurture. You say something like, "Oh, sweetheart. You really needed that hug. You feel a little overwhelmed. Everybody feels that way sometimes. Would you like to get your blankie and a book and we can curl up in the big chair and read?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:35:06](#) If she does, great. She's going to use you to co-regulate. That's how kids learn regulation, is that they borrow ours. They co-regulate with us. So you've taught her to connect

with someone else in order to feel safer and feel nurtured when she feels overwhelmed. That's terrific. Eventually she'll be able to curl up without you and self-regulate. This is a big plus when kids are able to do this with us. But sometimes they can't. She might say, "No. No book." And she might continue to whine. "I need a cookie. Why can't the sky be red instead of blue?" Or whatever. Then she just needs to cry.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:35:51](#)

You could try laughter but probably she's past that point. My experience is that by the time kids are whining a lot, then it's past that point. Try laughter early on in the process but at this point just hold her lovingly and just reflect about how bad things are. "Oh, everything's wrong, isn't it? You wanted a cookie and I said no and then you didn't want a book and then I said it was time to wash your hands," or whatever, "even the sky's the wrong color and that just makes you feel so sad and worn out inside doesn't it? Maybe you just need to cry, Sweetie. That's okay. Everybody needs to cry sometimes."

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:36:32](#)

And you hold her and she cries and that's what she needed all along. And afterwards she might fall asleep but more likely she'll just be in a really good mood. I guarantee you she won't be whining. Notice you're not positively reinforcing the whining when you acknowledge the feelings. You're meeting the deeper need that's causing the whining so she doesn't need to whine, but you're still setting a really clear limit. And you've also made it less likely that she'll be whining tomorrow because that feeling of connection that you're nurturing will make her less likely to whine. She's learning that even when the world does not go her way, she has backup. She has a parent who loves her, understands her even on her worst days and can help her learn to help herself feel better when she feels hopeless or overwhelmed. Imagine what a wonderful world it would be if all parents could give that gift to their children.

Question 28:

- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:37:30](#) This parent is saying, "My son likes to throw things especially when he's angry and sitting in his high chair. I've tried to replace random objects that he might have on hand with a soft animal or a ball, allowing him to get out his pent up aggression in a safe manner but that makes him even more angry. He refuses the soft animal and he yells, 'Throw car.' What should I do?" Well, you should not give him a car to throw. You can recognize his desire to throw the car. And most importantly, acknowledge the feelings. "You wish you could throw a car right now. You are so mad you want to throw something hard." But you still enforce, "Throwing is only for safe things. Use your words. Say, 'Mad.' Tell me what you're mad about and I can help you."
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:38:11](#) The other part of this parent's question is, "During his mealtime at home I usually give him some cards when I see an impulse coming, which sometimes keeps him from throwing his spoon or his cup. But when we eat out, obviously, that's not practical. We need strategies for that." I've got to say, I wouldn't eat out with a toddler unless absolutely necessary. I mean, if he throws all the time when he's in his high chair, I'm wondering why. It sounds like he loves to throw things when he's in his high chair but he can't be angry every time he's in his high chair, especially when you go out. Why would he be angry? So I would just say he needs to have something else to do in the high chair, something that he's interested in instead of throwing things.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:38:59](#) And if you're eating out with him when he's at this age, which as I said is not something I would probably choose to do, pull out all the stops. Pull out your phone. Show him videos. Do whatever you need to do. I don't think he'll throw your phone because he'll be too fascinated by it. But obviously you're going to have to stay very engaged with him, which is one of the reasons one doesn't like to eat out with toddlers because you have to be engaged with them instead of engaged with your dinner companions.
- Dr. Laura Markham: [01:39:27](#) You asked when he's going to outgrow this? Well, since he's in a high chair, he's a toddler, right, I'm assuming? He

won't be doing this next year. He'll have many more interesting ways to express his displeasure to you.

Dr. Laura Markham: [01:39:42](#)

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 in this audio, please submit it for possible inclusion on my podcast. Just go to AhaParenting.com/podcast and leave your question as a voice memo. This is Dr. Laura Markham wishing you less drama and more love. Goodbye for now.