Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids Online Course

Week 9: **Mastery**

Transcript

Hello, and welcome to Week 9 of the Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids online course. This is Dr. Laura Markham, and our topic this week is mastery. What is mastery? It's being able to manage ourselves so that we can achieve our goals in life. Whatever our current goal may be, we'll need some things beyond intelligence to accomplish it.

We'll need resilience. We'll need confidence that we can do hard things. There will be inevitable hurdles, and it will be our emotional intelligence that helps us to overcome those hurdles—the self-discipline and perseverance to stay on task, the enthusiasm, and the ability to fully engage and be present in the moment with that task that allows us to have the emotional energy to keep going.

We'll need curiosity, excitement about learning. Mastering anything requires us to experiment, to explore so that we can learn as much as possible about our target goal and how to overcome the inevitable roadblocks.

Finally, we need to be able to listen to our own unique passions and be guided by our own inner wisdom, so that we know what makes our heart sing, and so that our deeper wisdom can guide us to solutions that are deeper and richer than what our cognitive mind alone can come up with – and it takes courage to follow the beat of our own inner drummer.

Do you notice what other quality is required for someone to exhibit mastery of any kind in any field? They need to be able to regulate themselves. If you can't regulate your own anxiety, you'll procrastinate and you'll never achieve your goals. If you can't regulate your anger, you'll act impulsively and wreck your project when you get frustrated, or fight with your co-workers. If you can't regulate your screen time or your phone use, you'll never take the necessary steps to accomplish your goals.

Mastery requires basic emotional intelligence as a foundation. Then we build on that foundation by developing traits like resilience, confidence in our ability to do hard things, perseverance, self-discipline, and the courage to be guided by our own inner compass.

So if we want our child to have a meaningful life, we need to help them master these developmental hurdles, because children who learn how to do these things are able to tap into their unique gifts and passions, hone them, and share them with the world. That's part of realizing our full potential, and it's a very important part of living a meaningful life.

There's another important benefit to mastery. It's what allows us to lose ourselves in flow. I think we could say actually we're finding ourselves when we're in flow. Flow is that state beyond the cognitive mind where we tap into something universal, where we're using every part of ourselves and we feel richly, deeply alive.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who's an expert on flow, says that flow is that state of complete absorption in an activity where we've gained enough skill that we move beyond the anxiety about something that we're doing, and we simply explore it, play with it, and engage with it. Athletes call it being "in the zone."

Experts think that we're at our happiest as human beings in two ways. One, when we connect with other people. Two, when we're in a state of flow, because we're realizing our full potential and we're tapping into the vast potential of the universe and playing in it to create.

What does flow have to do with mastery and with your child? If you want your child to experience flow, your child needs to develop certain traits, and they're the same traits as we associate with mastery. The traits are curiosity, the ability to persist through obstacles because you're motivated by your own intrinsic motivation, your interest in mastering whatever it is you're doing, rather than because of outside reward.

This constellation of traits we're talking about that help someone to live a meaningful life and realize their unique passions and share them with the world; that person who has those traits is able to accomplish their goals on the most basic level.

If any of us ever wants to accomplish a goal, we need to summon up certain qualities in our self in order to go after that goal, in order to listen to our own inner guidance, in order to overcome hurdles and stick to the task at hand that will eventually lead us toward our goal, even if that task at the moment is not rewarding—because we have the larger framework that it's worth it to reach our goal.

When we talk about mastery and the qualities that allow someone to accomplish their goals, what we're really talking about is success. **If you want your child to succeed in life then these qualities are what will help your child to do that.**

The word "success" is really loaded. I'm not talking about success in conventional terms, in the terms of our society. I'm not talking about your child becoming a millionaire or a master of industry or getting into Harvard. I'm talking about your child knowing what will make her heart sing and being able to achieve those goals that she herself sets.

Today we're going to talk about:

- How to help your child develop resilience
- How to help your child develop perseverance
- How to help your child develops confidence that he can do hard things
- How to help your child develop her own inner compass
- How to help your child feel competent in the world
- How to help your child feel powerful

While we've discussed self-discipline earlier in this course, we'll talk again today about how your child develops self-discipline. Because, of course, as you can see, the self-discipline to manage yourself to achieve your goals is one of the bottom line skills that every child needs to develop.

How can we, as parents, help our child become a person who can accomplish his or her goals? The most important thing, the bottom line, is what we've talked about so far in this course already. When you set empathic limits, you help your child develop self-discipline. When you regulate your own emotions, you're regulating your own anxiety and that keeps you from helicoptering and interrupting your child's learning, so your child can practice and learn through mistakes, and learn by experimenting.

We'll talk more today about helping kids develop self-discipline through empathic limits and about regulating your own anxiety so you don't helicopter. We'll also talk about specific kinds of coaching – very practically – that you can use day to day with your child. For instance, how can you encourage your child so that your child is motivated rather than de-motivated? You can guess I'm talking here about praise. What kind of praise and encouragement is useful to kids and what kind isn't?

Let's begin by discussing resilience. What is resilience? Resilience is the ability to recover from things that stress us. We know that every life will have hardship of some sort; into every life a little rain must fall. People who are resilient allow themselves to feel those hardships but they're able to keep on functioning. Sometimes they even find wisdom through their suffering, which they use to live a deeper life.

Think about a branch that's resilient. It bends and bounces back to where it was before and stays strong. It might even be strengthened by being blown by the wind. But a branch that is brittle will break when it's bent. It doesn't have the resilience to bounce back.

Simply ignoring hard times, pretending they're not happening, doesn't help us be resilient. Resilience includes stretching ourselves to accommodate the hard things that happened and to grow from them. That's resilience.

It's common in the popular press to see resilience equated with something called grit, which seems to mean spunkiness and perseverance and the ability to get back on a horse when it throws us. Resilience is a lot like grit. But when we see these stories in the popular press, it's very common for the theme to be that children will develop grit and resilience when they're allowed to fail. Like many tropes in our culture, that has a little truth to it, but it's only part of the truth; it's missing an essential component.

Here's what I mean. When children fail, they do learn something. Sometimes they'll learn that they should've studied for their test, for instance, if they fail a test. But other times they learn that they're failures. So children don't develop grit or resilience just by failing. Children develop resilience and grit by the experience of failing—and then picking themselves up off the floor, trying again and succeeding.

That's what children need to develop grit – the experience of living through failure and learning that it's not an emergency and it doesn't make them a failure, that they can survive having failed at something and still be a lovable, worthwhile human being, that they don't have to feel ashamed of themselves for having failed at this thing, and most important of all, that there's a learning that makes the experience worth it.

It's not always failure we're talking about; it may be something the child had zero control over, like the death of someone they love. That's a severe stressor, and when children can recover well from such a death, we call those children resilient. What might be the lesson a child would take from death? Well, that's a hard one. We struggle, all of us, with that our whole lives. But maybe the lesson is something like "Life is very, very precious. Every moment is precious. Every person is precious. Let me truly value every minute I have and all of my opportunities to love." That's a pretty great learning to take with you from a devastating childhood event.

Of course, most of the incidents – thank goodness – in our children's lives are not so devastating, and many of those incidents the child does have some control over. When she's furious and throws her toy and it breaks, she's in control of that and there's a very important learning that can happen there. The learning is "I can actually control myself." If he doesn't study for his test and he fails it, the learning we want him to have is "I can control this next time by studying for the test. I don't have to fail." But, of course, much of the time that's not what children learn. They learn "I'm a bad person because I can't control my emotions so that I throw things and break them and I can't keep the things I love," or they learn "I'm a failure, I failed my test."

In order to learn from failure, the child needs to feel that the failure has not been in vain, that they've gotten something of value from it, that they've learned a lesson, they know what to do next time to avoid this result – for instance, study for their test – or they've learned something about life and they need to feel that life is still worth living, that while they can't always get what they want, they can always get what they need so that they don't walk away embittered, which will just make them feel like giving up next time.

Our question today is how can we help our children become resilient by influencing the lessons they are learning, the conclusions they're drawing from the inevitable disappointments, frustrations, failures, and even devastating events that every human is bound to encounter?

Let's think about this. What does work to help you draw conclusions that are positive instead of negative when bad things happen? What about in your own life? When you have a big disappointment, what helps you get through it? What helps you learn that next time maybe you can actually handle things better so that the disappointment doesn't happen and you can avoid it? What helps you learn that even if there's nothing you can do to control the external circumstances, you can always control you and how you respond to those circumstances? What helps you remember that life is still worth living and life is still good even though there is inevitably suffering in our lives? What helps you get through the tough times?

Usually what makes that difference for humans is another person. It's knowing that someone else understands what we're going through. It's having their support while we grieve that disappointment. Even when there's nothing the other person can do to make things better, it somehow still helps not to feel so alone, to feel like somebody is there who understands.

What if the person you were talking to about your disappointment blamed you? How would that make you feel? Maybe you lost your job and the other person said, "Well, you wouldn't have lost your job if you've done XYZ." Even if it were true, how does that make you feel?

What if the other person blamed life? What if you lost your job and they said, "We can't count on anything these days and you can never count on keeping a job. Bosses are all jerks. They're just interested in the bottom line and they never care about their employees. Life is like that." After listening to that in your vulnerable state from your big disappointment, what might your takeaway be? What would your attitude be toward the next person who interviewed you for a job? What would your attitude be towards your job once you got another one? What would your attitude be toward life in general, toward your future? What would you conclude about life?

What if your support person went into immediate problem solving while you were still grieving your big disappointment? You've just been laid off, made redundant, fired from your job. You come home, you're devastated, you're worried sick about the future and about money, you feel

like a failure, you're grieving, you feel like you're in shock and your support person says to you, "Don't worry. We can solve this. You're going to get another job. Here's what you do. Here's how you do it." Do you think you could even listen? Do you think you could constructively problem solve? Mightn't you lash out angrily at that person and say, "You don't even understand what I'm going through!"

You can see where I'm going with this. When your child has a big disappointment, what does your child need? First of all, your child needs to be allowed to have her feelings. She needs to grieve about what happened and then she needs a chance to reflect on what happened, to come to her own conclusions about how she could do things differently next time.

That's tricky for us, because as her parents, we think we know what she could do differently next time. But if we jump right in with a lecture and blame and guilt tripping her and shaming her, she's not going to be open to learning lessons. She's going to be blaming everybody else around her. But if we can just open the space for her to have those feelings and give her a little time; then once the feelings are not so turbulent, we can certainly have discussions where we ask judicious questions about it.

"Huh, what do you think about what happened? Oh, so your friend said XYZ and you are really mad... I can understand that, that would've made me mad too. So you responded by telling her that you never wanted to see her again? Well, we've all felt that way sometimes, huh? Then what did she say? Oh wow, that must have really hurt your feelings! I wonder how she was feeling. Oh, it's hard when these things happen with someone you care so much about. I wonder if there's anything you could do now to make things better? Yes, so you could do that. And what do you think would happen then?"

Notice how different this is from a lecture. I'm not telling the child what she should have done with her friend. I'm empathizing with the feelings, and I'm drawing her attention to what happened and how she felt and, therefore, how she responded, and I'm asking her on some level, "So how did that work out for you? Is there anything you could do now?"

This is very different than lecturing. This is allowing your child to reflect on her own experience and to come to her own conclusions. That's how we learn. That's how children develop good judgment, reflecting on their experience. Often good judgment comes from reflecting on bad experience. That's why it's okay for kids to make mistakes. In fact, some things you can probably only learn from experiences that don't feel good.

Notice what else I'm not doing here. I'm not blaming the other person. I'm not saying, "That girl, I always knew she was no good. I always knew she didn't care about you." Notice what else

I'm not doing. I'm not blaming life. I'm not saying, "You can't count on friends. You can only count on family." I'm letting her draw her own conclusions about life.

What kinds of conclusions might she be drawing here? "Sometimes I get upset and I get hurt feelings and I say things I don't really mean to my friends. Hopefully I can figure out something I can do to make it better. But no matter what, I have a safe haven. I can go to my parent, my mom or my dad. They always understand. They don't blame me. They know what it's like to feel this way. They listen to me, they help me, and I feel better. I always come out of it feeling like I have more internal resources to solve the problem."

Now, doesn't that sound like a child who's becoming resilient, who trusts that life will give her what she needs and will give her the support from other people that she needs in order to go forward and do what she needs to do in life? Doesn't that sound like a child who's learning that even though she'll make mistakes, she can always find some way to try to remedy the situation, make things better and learn a lesson for next time?

Notice something you have to do inside yourself for this to work. You have to regulate your own anxiety. If your reaction to your daughter's social challenges is that she'll never get it together – "She's bossy. She is difficult. She'll never have a friend," or "Just like it was for me, she's going to get bullied over and over again" – naturally, you're upset when you feel those things, but notice what happens if you panic. Your feelings end up taking center stage.

You can't give your child the space to grieve about her experience. You can't give her the space to reflect on her experience so that she can learn a lesson. So you jump in out of your own anxiety; you lecture her about what she should have done, which makes her feel blamed and ashamed – and of course that's true even if you're completely correct in your view – and you rob your child of the chance not only to process her emotions but to reflect on her experience so that she can begin to develop good judgment.

Does she come out of it more resilient? No. She actually doesn't feel like she has a safe haven to work out her experience. Instead, she comes to you and she's immediately on the defensive because you're telling her what she did wrong, how to do it right, and what to do now.

It isn't easy to stay calm when our child has a problem – we're parents; naturally we get anxious, worried on their behalf – so there are two important things to remember here. The first, work on your own emotions. If you got bullied as a child, you're naturally going to have a hard time with your child's social issues. The more work you can do on yourself, the healthier your child will be emotionally, always. When you notice that you're starting to feel anxious, remember you're getting dysregulated. Stop, drop it, breathe, work on your own stuff, and then you can come back to your child and be constructive.

The second thing to remember is trust. Trust in your child. Trust in his innate goodness, his ability to learn from his experience, his ability to figure things out. As long as you meet his basic needs, so he feels heard, so he can work out emotions, so he feels valued, he'll begin to draw conclusions that will help him in life, and he'll learn from his mistakes.

You already do know how to do this, to trust that deeply. When your baby learned to walk, he fell down. He probably had many falls; maybe some of them were even big ones. That's what happens when kids learn to walk. It can be scary for parents, but in the end, your child did learn to walk and you helped with that process. You comforted him when he fell and got hurt.

You didn't shame or blame him or guilt trip him or lecture him. You encouraged him. You were there to commiserate when it got hard. Maybe you held your hands out to him when he took a step toward you. You gave him confidence in his ability to do hard things because you trusted that he could do it.

There is one very big difference between your child when he was learning to walk and your child today, and that's the prefrontal cortex. As your child gets older and the brain develops, your child learns about cause and effect. A 13-month-old is not usually angry that he fell down; he's not angry at the floor. He may be frustrated but he's not holding a grudge against the floor. Whereas an older child – even a not very much older child, a two-year-old – often is angry at the circumstances that are frustrating her. So when your child has a big disappointment, inevitably anger will be part of that. Anger is part of the grieving process. We just can't bear those feelings. We lash out. We want to blame the step that tripped us in the case of a two-year-old or the toy we tripped over, and maybe it was our brother's toy so we're furious at him. That kind of lashing out is a completely normal human reaction.

As your child's coach, it's critical that you just accept that your child, of course, is going to be angry as part of the grieving process, part of dealing with the frustration, part of letting go of the cherished dream that now won't come true. Your child may say very angry things about the teacher– it's all the teacher's fault that she failed her test – or the karate coach who was so unfair to him.

You know what? Just let it go. You're not going to argue with your child's anger. Of course, your child is angry. You can even empathize. You'd be angry, too. No wonder they're angry. Or if you don't agree, simply, "It doesn't seem fair, does it? It really seems to you that the teacher or the coach was unfair. I hear you."

Even if you don't agree with them, you can acknowledge their point of view. Because once the child gets through the feelings, the anger will vanish. Once the child actually feels the full

disappointment, the sadness, the grief, then the anger is no longer necessary as a defense and it will melt away. Your child will not be an angry person for life.

But many of us have a very hard time with our child's anger, and so we argue with the anger. Just let the anger be. Make space for all of the child's feelings. Of course, if your child is angry at you, that's also completely normal. Even if it's not your fault, your child secretly thinks that you should orchestrate their life so that it's perfect. Why didn't you know the toy was there that was going to trip them? Why didn't you make the world a better place for them?

You can just say, "You're so mad you're even mad at me right now. I wish I could have done something too. It sure doesn't seem fair, does it?" You're not taking their anger on, you're not blaming yourself, but you're also not reacting against it. You're not taking it personally.

So that's the formula for resilience in children. All children will experience disappointment, frustration, unhappiness, sometimes even big tragedies, and they need to learn they can survive it – and even take away something from it that is positive; it was a learning experience. Now they know what to do next time to avoid the situation or to make things better, or at least they take away the certitude that even though bad things can happen, they're a good person and they can have a good life.

We, as adults, facilitate this process when we create space for our child to experience all of those feelings – and we hold the light. Yes, they're in the darkness but we're not crawling in there with them. We're holding the light; we're saying, "I know it seems bleak right now but it's really not an emergency. You'll see. It will be okay. You'll wake up in the morning, the sun will be shining and life will still be worth living." You don't say those things, but simply your attitude, that in fact it's not an emergency, communicates those feelings.

After children have had support for their emotions, then we ask judicious questions that allow them to reflect on their experience and they learn better ways of handling things in the future, which gives them confidence about the future and the willingness to try again. So we, as the parents, can empower our children to always find a way to make things better, but that can't happen until the child has had a chance to fully experience all those feelings and move past the grief and the disappointment.

Why are we spending so much time on resilience when our topic is mastery? Because resilience is the foundation of mastery. No matter what your child attempts in life, there will be obstacles. Anything worth doing will inevitably have obstacles on the path. Those obstacles aren't all bad; there's nothing wrong with the obstacles. In fact, we could argue that those obstacles are teaching your child some important lessons: how to overcome obstacles certainly, but also how to approach the problem that he's trying to solve, how to do a better job solving it.

We all learn from overcoming obstacles—but if we gave up at the first obstacle because we weren't resilient enough to think we could overcome obstacles and do hard things, then we would never accomplish anything.

The foundation of mastery is resilience. But then we need to build on that resilience with other skills. For instance, we need to problem solve. We need to regulate our emotions so that we can actually think clearly. We need to persevere at the task. We need to have self-discipline. We need to have enthusiasm for what we're doing so that we stay engaged. We need to have optimism that it will turn out. And we need to have curiosity and an excitement about learning and the willingness to practice, practice, practice so that we can gain the skills that are necessary to master whatever it is we're trying to master.

If that sounds like a lot, it's because it is a lot. But here's the really good news. When a child has resilience and self-discipline and is able to get in touch with her own unique passions, she will definitely develop mastery. That's because she is motivated to follow that passion where it leads and to keep working at it. When she runs into a roadblock, she has the resilience to get up and try again. When she hits a rough path or developing the necessary skills takes a lot of practice, she has the self-discipline to stay on course. Resilience and the self-discipline together, along with her interest in whatever it is, that's enough to help her develop the other skills she needs.

So if you forget everything else on this audio about mastery, remember this, because it's a very important understanding of your child. What we've just said is that when a child is free and encouraged to follow his own passions and has both resilience and self-discipline, he gains the skills he needs to develop mastery just by following those passions. Those skills are mostly about the development of the prefrontal cortex. They're about developing executive function.

Executive function – which means the ability to plan ahead, to stay focused and on task, to organize the work that needs to be done, to think well and make good decisions to problem solve – all of those essential executive function skills are built through attempts at mastery.

When the child is motivated by her own drive, her own excitement, her own passion and curiosity about something, and she has self-discipline and resilience, she will then be able to develop the rest of what she needs to do because her brain will develop as she uses it. As she exercises her brain in different ways, she will develop better executive function.

That's such an exciting idea, and it also teaches us another thing about mastery. Play is a form of mastery. Think about it. Self-directed, the child's own excitement and passion about something, which might in this case be playing shop, so she's setting up a shop. As she plays, she runs into obstacles. "Oh, I don't know how to make a sign to say how much money these potatoes cost." She solves the problem.

When she runs into a problem, the pencil lead breaks on her, she has the resilience to think, "Okay, this isn't an emergency. I can solve this problem," and the self-discipline to stay on task even when the going gets rough or it's boring to make all those signs that say "five cents" on them. That's why dramatic play builds executive function and why play-based preschools are proven to be so much better for young children.

Let's get back to mastery. We've talked a lot about resilience. I keep referring to self-discipline, but we haven't talked about it. I don't want to spend a lot of time today on self-discipline because we've referred to it earlier in this course on a number of other occasions.

But just to review for you—how does a child develop self-discipline? Every time the child –or the adult – willingly gives up something that he or she wants for something that he or she wants more, that person builds the neural capacity for self-control – but notice there has to be a choice to do this so that the child builds the neural wiring.

Then the next time the child has two competing impulses – like "I'd really like to eat that cake that Mom put away in that high cupboard, but I also really want Mom to trust me" – the child will have the neural strength to override the lower impulses, to go for what's actually more important to the child on a deeper level. That's self-discipline.

Every time we set a limit for our child but we do with understanding and empathy, and our child has the necessary emotional support to pull it together and to go along with our limit, every time the child does that, the child builds neural wiring for self-discipline.

That's one reason that punishment keeps our children from developing self-discipline. They don't actually have the opportunity to choose to rein in their lesser impulses. They're actually being forced to do what we're telling them to do, and they get distracted by our punishment and stuck in resentment of all the reasons they're right and we're wrong. They never even own up to their responsibility and what some part of them actually would like to do, because remember kids always have both sides going on. They have the side that wants the cake and they have the side that wants to do the right thing. When we punish, we're on the side of the right thing and they're on the side of the cake.

When we set limits but we do it in a way that's understanding, the child is not in reaction against us. So the child has to own both sides. "I want the cake and I want my mother's trust." Luckily, you're practicing setting limits with empathy. You're probably not perfect at it yet but just keep practicing. You'll get better and better, and you'll find your child exhibits more and more self-discipline.

Now there's one last thing I'd like to say about self-discipline. In the chapter on Mastery in *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids,* I described Walter Mischel's cookie test, which is actually more commonly known as the marshmallow test. Parents often get very anxious about that test. "How would my child do? Can I replicate the test at home and see what kind of self-discipline my child has so I know how they're going to turn out?"

Completely unnecessary. All you have to do is emotion coach and set empathic limits and your child will develop self-discipline, self-regulation, and executive function, and all the other things your child needs to do well on the marshmallow test and to do well in life. You do not have to test your child because here's the good news; you can develop executive function.

Those skills for mastery, they're executive function skills. That's what we've been talking about in this entire audio. Self-discipline skills and self-regulation skills – regulating emotion – those are what we've been talking about in this entire online course.

So it doesn't matter how your child would do on the marshmallow test today. It does not matter. What matters is that if you use this approach, your child will develop all the skills that would make him or her successful on the marshmallow test, but so much more important, in life—because that's where it matters. The reason people get freaked about the test is they think, "Oh, will my child be successful in life? Let me test him and find out."

There's one more thing I need to address about self-discipline and the marshmallow test for those of you who are fans of Alfie Kohn. I'm a huge fan of Alfie Kohn. I recommended his book *Unconditional Parenting* earlier in this course because it's the single best source on the research about punishment and the effect of punishment on children. Kohn is a very well respected academic. He has a number of books out, and he and I agree on most everything.

The reason I'm bringing him up here is that parents often say to me, "Didn't you know Alfie Kohn says that marshmallow test is no good and the whole concept of self-discipline is problematic?" So I want to address that quickly.

Kohn points out that in our society, there's a big emphasis on self-discipline and it always seem to take the form of kids having to suck it up and plug away at schoolwork that's stupid, and an assumption that self-discipline comes from the child being punished. Of course, that's all a fallacy. You know that from listening to this audio and all the audios in this course, so I agree completely with Kohn about all of this.

We know self-discipline comes from empathic limits. That's at the core of my coaching approach. My whole approach to mastery is that kids have to follow their own passions. But my

takeaway is that self-discipline is still important. We need to explain to parents how kids should *actually* develop it, which is empathic limits.

I think Kohn's takeaway might be that the whole idea of self-discipline has become so destructive to children that we should be fighting it, so he builds on this particular issue. He finds fault with the Mischel marshmallow test for the very legitimate reason that the kids who were able to distract themselves so that they could wait for the second treat, happen to be the kids with the higher IQs. Kohn says that it was just an intelligence test.

But the kids who were able to delay didn't just do better on IQ test and SATs; they were *also* described by their parents as more competent as they grew into the teen years. As adults, they had healthier bodies, they had healthier weights, they had healthier marriages. Brain scans showed they had a more developed frontal cortex.

Yes, they tested as having a higher IQ, but I would argue that that was a function of having more emotional intelligence. In other words, we know that people who can better manage their anxiety – in other words, who are more emotionally intelligent – will also test better academically.

I think self-discipline is a really important concept for us because it helps children and the rest of us to get what we want out of life. I could talk about self-discipline all day, but I think you understand the basics of self-discipline and resilience and how those contribute to mastery.

Let's talk for a moment about regulating yourself and how that contributes to your child's mastery. Obviously, if you're modeling self-regulation, your child is going to learn better emotional self-regulation and is going to be more able to regulate herself so that she can develop resilience, develop self-discipline, and the ability to stay on task with projects even when they're frustrating or boring.

There's another reason your self-regulation can really help your child in developing mastery, and that's that it will keep you from being a helicopter parent. Parents often ask me, "How do I know if I'm a helicopter parent?" I joke that it's like defining promiscuity – somebody who does it more than you do.

There's no magic guideline for what's responsive versus what's helicoptering. I would say that there were probably times when people around me thought that I was a helicopter parent because I wouldn't leave my child crying at preschool, for instance. We can't always go by social norms.

The gauge I would use is this: are you making your decision based on your needs or your child's needs? To use an example from my own life, when your son wants to ride the New York City subway and you're anxious about it, that's your anxiety, not his. Of course, you're going to be a

responsible parent. Of course, you're going to go with him and teach him. Eventually, when he's ready, he's going to do it himself and he's going to be so grateful to you.

I still remember a time well before the subway when we were living outside of New York City in a suburb and my son who was then four and a half years old had to catch a big school bus to get to Pre-K. My husband taught him how to cross the street by himself. Then for the first time, he let him do it. My son crossed over, he crossed back, he threw his arms around my husband and he said, "I love you, Daddy!"

That's because he had been allowed to spread his wings, try something new, be independent, and gain confidence. It made him so happy to be believed in that way by his dad, and to take that step into the world by himself, at the age of four and a half.

My husband had made sure he was completely safe doing this. He was standing right there across the street watching the whole time, and he had taught him how to do it safely. But it still took a leap of faith for my husband to do that.

It still requires the parent to regulate our own fears, our own anxiety. But if we aren't able to do that, we hold our children back. We helicopter, we stop them from believing in themselves and their ability to step out into the world, to pursue their goals and to gain mastery.

There's so much more we can talk about related to mastery. It's a course in itself, actually. But I want to spend a few minutes now on praise.

Praise is generally thought of as positive, and indeed it is received by children as positive. We, the most important people in their world are saying to them, "Good job." But what do children actually learn from this? It's not so positive.

First of all, they're learning to look outside themselves for the evaluation of how they're doing, and that's the opposite of what we want for mastery. Remember, for mastery, the child needs the inner compass so that she knows what makes her soul sing. When we're saying, "Good job," we're the evaluators from outside her.

When children hear "good job" a lot, research shows they stop raising their hand so often. They get a little bit worried about what they should say in class, because they're worried about being evaluated by an authority figure who obviously is the person who really knows what's a good job or not.

If we want our child to have their own connection to their own inner source of "What's right and wrong?" – that's their inner compass – and "What makes my heart sing?" then we need to say, "How did you feel about that?" not "Good job," which is what we felt about it.

But that doesn't ever mean we don't encourage our child. Encouragement is not evaluating; it's matching how the child feels. "Oh, look, you did it!" because she is so excited there at the top of the monkey bars. So instead of us evaluating her – "Good job, you climbed up" – we're matching her excitement about it. We're empathizing with her. We're acknowledging her experience.

Notice that this kind of encouragement encourages mastery more than praise does. So the child has just climbed up to the top of the monkey bars; if we evaluate her, what did she learn? Pleasing us is what's important. We have certain standards for her to meet and she needs to meet them or she doesn't get our approval – "Oh, good job!" The child can't help but wonder, every time she climbs the monkey bars, if she's doing it well enough based on our approval. And she's always looking to us, "Mom, Dad, look at me. Do you like it? See me up here? Do you like what I'm doing now?"

It's a very different learning for the child if we empathize with her experience and her excitement and we say, "Wow! Look at you up there," and she says, "Yes. I'm up here. I did what I wanted to do. I climbed up and I did it. Look at me up here. Yes!"

She revels in her own experience. We're not evaluating what she has done. She did something that she was motivated to do and she's now looking to herself for what she wants to do next. "Huh. Maybe I'll draw a picture in the dirt." That's very different than the child who thinks she'll get a "good job" if she climbs even higher. Or maybe she wants to climb even higher, but she's not doing it because her parents told her "good job" for climbing; she's doing it because that's where her heart leads. That's encouraging mastery.

If your child climbs the play structure and says, "Look at me, Dad. Look at me, Mom," you can absolutely wave and be enthusiastic because you're looking at him. You're seeing him. That's what matters. It's not so much about his accomplishment being so fantastic; it's him you're looking at. He knows that climbing up there was great. That's why he wants you to look. "That's cool." He's just showing you how excited he is and he wants you to be excited with him.

So I'm never suggesting that you withhold your excitement from your child. You're excited about his climbing the monkey bars, you're excited about everything about him. You're seeing *him*, complete with all of his new skills and his courage to climb up there.

Acknowledge his accomplishment without evaluating it. "Look at you up there." And you can describe what you see. "You climbed all the way to the top." Emphasize that they have the right to decide that they're proud of themselves. "You must be so proud of yourself." Help them see how they achieve that success. "I see. You climbed from the side instead of the middle this time and you got a lot higher. Wow."

When you describe your child's strategy for accomplishing whatever he or she is accomplishing, your child notices and says, "Huh, (a) I feel seen and (b) I see what I did that made it possible for me to get to this point. I can decide whether to repeat that strategy or not."

This is also known as describing the process, encouraging the process as opposed to the product. We don't actually care that our child made it to the top of this particular play structure. But the process of getting there, that's a really important thing because guess what, he worked hard, he was courageous, he didn't give up – all these traits that contribute to mastery. If we want to encourage our child's mastery, we encourage those kinds of traits.

Is this evaluative? Yes. I think it's very hard to give our child feedback that doesn't come from our own view of the world, and our view of the world is shaped by our values. One of my values is that any job that's worth doing is worth doing well and that working hard will always get you closer to what you want even if it's not sufficient to get you what you want.

One of the things I say to children is, "Wow, you worked so hard on that." Parents sometimes ask me, "Aren't you afraid of creating a workaholic?" I would say yes, if I were saying to the child, "You're a good boy because you worked so hard on that." I would be saying he's not okay unless he always works hard, which is a perfect way to set him up for a heart attack later in life.

But if I say, "You worked so hard on that and you didn't give up even when you got frustrated," he learns that he can do hard things. He can choose to overcome his frustration and keep plugging away at something that is something he wants. In that case, it's really his choice whether he wants to do that. He's not feeling like his lovableness depends on his working hard or his accomplishing anything.

Remember, when we focus on the child's accomplishment – "Good job! You won the game. You finished the XYZ," whatever it is – we're giving the child the message that he's only good because he won the game or finished the XYZ. Instead, we want to say, "Huh, you used strategies to get what you wanted," and then he thinks, "I have the power to use those strategies to get what I want in life." That's moving toward mastery.

Anytime you're wondering how to do this, just describe what you see. Describe what the child is doing, what is positive about it if you want to add that kind of a value judgment like, "Oh, you started with the outside of the puzzle first." You're giving him feedback on the strategy that's working for him.

Or you might say, "Wow! You've already got your shoes on. That makes it so much easier to get out of the house on time. Thank you." So you're not saying, "Good boy." You're saying what

you see, “You’ve already got your shoes on.” You’re describing it. You’re describing the positive impact of that – “That makes it so much easier to get out of the house on time.”

Then you’re saying thank you because that’s the human transaction. You’re showing your appreciation that he’s done this thing. You’re not saying, “Thank you for the puzzle work,” but you’re saying thank you that he’s making it easier to get out of the house on time, because in this case there’s a thank you that’s appropriate.

Whenever you wonder how to give effective “praise,” think of the word “describe.” Some people call this descriptive praise. Describe what the child is doing and the positive benefit or impact of that on you or on somebody else. But remember, the more you can stay away from evaluation, the more unconditionally loving your response is.

Just for the record, I think I should address the phrase “You’re so smart.” Most parents think that they should tell their child that she’s smart. Total mistake. Always backfires. When children hear you say that and then they try something new and they’re not good at it, they don’t assume that they can just try harder and they’ll figure it out; they assume, first, you were wrong about them being smart – they’re not smart because smart people don’t have a hard time with things – and second, they don’t want you to know they’re not smart, so they’re just not going to try. They won’t even try this thing because then it’ll expose they’re a fraud; they’re not so smart after all.

Instead, give your child feedback about what they’re doing that is making them successful, like working hard at that puzzle or focusing on learning something new, and let them know that when they do those things, they stretch their brain and they get even better at learning things and solving problems.

There’s no benefit to telling children they’re smart; it actually backfires. Instead, show enthusiasm for everything your child discovers, everything your child does, everything your child is. That enthusiasm, that encouragement, that unconditional love is what will help your child to gain his own confidence that so he can follow his own passions in life.

It may have occurred to you what the biggest obstacle is to supporting mastery in your child. It’s not just that you’re in the habit of saying, “Good job. You’re so smart,” which sort of sabotages your child as we’ve discussed. And it’s not just that you didn’t know how to set empathic limits until fairly recently and you’re still working at that. Those are both habits that you can do something about now that you understand them. They have not ruined your child for life. You’ll be able to do those things.

The biggest obstacle is actually our own anxiety as parents. Every one of us worries about our children. We want what's best for them, and too often, our own anxiety gets in the way. Parents step in to protect their child.

As a Montessori teacher told me recently, three-year-olds in the United States can't walk on uneven surfaces. I said, "Why?" She said, "Because we don't let them try."

That's the thing. We're always stopping kids from doing something where they might fall down. It's not a terrible thing to fall down even if you bruise your knee. You know what, you'll get back up and you'll be more careful next time and you will have learned something about how to walk on an uneven surface. One way our anxiety comes out is that we overprotect our children.

Another way our anxiety comes out is that we don't let our children make mistakes. If you can let your child pour his own milk from the time he's very young, he'll learn how to pour the milk. If you can have a stool that your child can get onto to help himself to water, then you won't have to be getting water all the time for your child. Children need to be able to learn to do basic household things.

It's okay if they make mistakes. If you start from the time they're little, just saying to them, "That's okay. We don't cry over spilled milk. It's okay. We always clean up our own messes. Come on. Let's get the paper towels. I'll help," your child will learn that there's no problem making a mistake spilling something. It's okay. It's not a tragedy. It's also not a big deal to clean it up. Your child won't say to you, "You clean it up," because they're not on the defensive. They don't feel like cleaning it up is punishment of some sort; they feel like that's just another fun task that is part of getting good at pouring the milk.

Another way that our anxiety gets in the way is that we end up stepping in with rewards and punishment when we're worried about our child's development. An example is that a wonderful teacher recently told me that she became worried that her own child was not able to read chapter books. Even though he was capable of it, he didn't have the confidence. So to give him the confidence, she let him earn a toy that he wanted. He had to read a certain number of chapter books to do that.

It all worked out great. Luckily, this child did not have a learning disability that was keeping him from being successful, which she already knew because she was a teacher, so she'd figured that out, that it was just a matter of confidence. She supported him, and he did read the chapter books and earned the toy. But *then* the next time he wanted to learn something – which happened to be drawing; he wanted to learn to draw dogs – he wondered if his mother would reward him for that by getting him another big toy!

She realized that she had done this out of her own anxiety. That sooner or later he would, of course, have learned to read chapter books on his own, and that by offering a reward, she had taken the focus off of the real reward, which is that he could read chapter books now, or he could learn to draw a dog if he wanted, and instead, she had put the focus on earning a toy.

I think in that kind of a case, we can see that it was our own anxiety. Of course, he's going to learn to read chapter books, but sometimes in the middle of anxiety, we don't see that. We think he has to master this right now.

I would just encourage you, if you begin to think that you need to give your child a reward to learn something or master a skill, remember children want mastery more than anything, and if they're not showing you that mastery, something is getting in their way.

Go to the underlying cause and support them to do it by offering them connection with you. For instance, in this case, the mom could have spent more time reading chapter books with her child and then just excusing herself to quickly take a phone call or put the wash into the dryer or whatever and say to him, "Do you want to keep reading this? Or do you want to wait until I get back?" Any kid who is in the middle of a story is going to want to try reading it himself.

These are some of the ways that our anxiety can push us to intervene with our child in ways that are not healthy for our child. There are other ways of course and they're detailed in *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids* in the chapter on Mastery. All of these are basically what we call helicopter parenting.

For the record, helicoptering is when we intervene out of our own needs, our own anxiety. It's not being responsive to your child; that's not helicoptering. Responsiveness has been shown in every study done on it to be very good for your child. It's actually the foundation of your child's attachment, security, resilience, self-discipline, emotional health. Your responsiveness to your child—your warmth, your empathy—That's great. Do that stuff.

It's when you step in to overprotect and to over-praise, to over-reward, and to keep your child from making a mess – those kinds of helicoptering are what get in the way of your child's development. Just ask yourself, "Am I doing this because of my own anxiety, or am I doing this because that's what he really needs to thrive?"

Remember, your child needs plenty of practice solving problems to develop mastery. Mastery depends on the child's ability to evaluate a problem, to consider various approaches, to experiment with solutions, and to manage his impulses and emotions when he gets frustrated with the various solutions. So the more problems your child has to solve in life, the better. He's

practicing. Your job is not to step in and solve the problems; your job is to support him so that he can solve the problems for himself.

Of course, there will be times when your child cannot solve the problem that is facing him. So, observe your child. Give him support when he needs it. Give him tools to use in the moment like calming his body, like self-talk or private talk to coach himself through a situation, so he can say to himself, "It's not an emergency. I can figure this out. Just keep practicing. Nobody bats a thousand." Give him phrases to use. Give him whatever support he needs so he can learn to solve that kind of a problem and you'll be supporting his development of mastery.

I want to close today with a very short story about resilience and why it's related to mastery. When my son was 11, his basketball team was in the finals. They fought a hard battle. All weekend long, they wore themselves out. They played their hearts out, but in the end, they lost the game. All of the kids were spent. Some of them were crying. My son was lying on the floor unable to even move, he was so exhausted from the weekend of playing. But you know what he said? "I wish we could do that again."

Let's raise a whole generation of resilient kids who know that we all end up on the floor sometimes but we can always get back up and try again, and we can always find a way to make the most of the cards we're dealt and to make the most of our unique gifts, to contribute to the world, and to make the most of the gift of being alive.

Thank you so much for joining me today, for your commitment to your child, and for your courage in changing yourself. This ends Week 9 – Mastery – of the **Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids** Online Course. This is Dr. Laura Markham of AhaParenting.com.