

Ep #2: Your Child's Behavior Is Not Personal



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With Your Host

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Taking your child's behaviors during a meltdown, personally, especially the ones that are directed at you like a flying remote or hurtful words is a normal automatic reaction. That said it is never helpful. In this episode I am going to teach you a parenting hack for separating the child you love from the behaviors you don't. Keep listening.

Welcome to The Autism Mom Coach, a podcast for moms who feel overwhelmed, afraid, and sometimes powerless as they raise their child with autism. My name is Lisa Candra. I'm a certified life coach, lawyer, and most importantly I'm a full-time single mom to a teenage boy with autism. In this podcast I'll show you how to transform your relationship with autism and special needs parenting. You'll learn how to shift away from being a victim of your circumstances to being the hero of the story you get to write. Let's get started.

Welcome to episode two. I am so glad you're here and I hope that you are finding this podcast helpful. I am recording this episode on a Saturday afternoon. We are exactly one month from moving from our current apartment where we've lived for four years since moving to Connecticut to a townhouse where we're going to have so much more room.

And as I go through my son's clothing, toys and school pictures it is so startling to see how much he has changed. When we arrived, he was 10 years old and he still looked and sounded like a little boy. And now that little boy face and voice have been replaced with that of a full-blown teenager and a really moody one at times. It gets rough in here. Which brings me to my topic of today.

Your child's behaviors are not personal. I want to begin by saying it is normal to take your child's behaviors especially the ones involving you personally. When you are the person who is being yelled at, smacked or it is your property that is being destroyed, of course, it's an automatic reaction to believe the behavior is personal. In this episode I want to talk to you about what happens when we take our child's behavior personally and how it is not helping us using an example from one of my clients.

Ep #2: Your Child's Behavior Is Not Personal

So, my client's son is 12 years old and he loves playing videogames. He wakes up early on Sunday mornings to play and for the most part this has not been a problem. He is occupied and my client and her husband get some much-needed rest. So, it's been a win/win until last Sunday. Last Sunday was different. My client woke up to high pitched screams and her son shouting about the game he had just lost. She entered the room, asked him to stop screaming and also asked him to put the remote down because she did not want another shattered TV.

Well, he continued to scream and in his frustration hurled the remote across the room hitting her in the face. When we take our child's behaviors personally we make it personal. First, we make it about our child, we judge them. Here were some of my client's thoughts about her child's behavior. He is violent. He is spiteful. He is spoiled.

Second, we make it about ourselves, some of her thoughts were he was trying to hurt me. He only does this to me. We put ourselves at the center of their behaviors by making it about ourselves.

And third, we make it about our parenting, some of the thoughts she was having were things like, this is because I spoiled him. This is because I am lazy. This is because I like to sleep in on Sunday mornings.

And here is the problem with all of this. First, these thoughts that we're having when we're making it personal, they create more stress for us and result in us reacting and overreacting in ways that are usually unhelpful and are actually counter to the exact behavior we want to model for our kids. In other words, we start acting like they're acting. For example, when my client was having the thought, he is violent and feeling angry, she yelled and screamed at her child, further escalating the tension for both of them.

Second, when we make it personal we create disconnection with our child. When we are thinking that our children are aggressive, or violent, or spoiled, or disrespectful, it's really hard to think well of them. Finally, we create disconnection with ourselves.

Ep #2: Your Child's Behavior Is Not Personal

When we are thinking, we raised a terrible child or that our child's behaviors are our fault we begin to lose trust in ourselves and confidence in our own parenting abilities. Here is the good news, your child's behavior may involve you but it's not about you. This is because during an autism meltdown your child is in a survival response. Adrenalin and cortisol are running the show and rational thought is offline. To understand what is happening during an autism meltdown it's helpful to have some background about our brain's limbic system and prefrontal cortex.

The limbic system is the emotional part of the brain. It manages our behavioral and emotional responses especially when it comes to behavior we need for survival, the four Fs, feeding, fighting, fleeing and fornication or whatever you'd like to call it. When it senses danger it acts lightening quick by activating our body's fight, flight response.

The prefrontal cortex on the other hand is our thinking brain. It contributes to a wide variety of executive functions like impulse control, emotional regulation, language and communication. In other words, areas all children and especially our neurodivergent children struggle with on a good day. Unlike the limbic system the prefrontal cortex does not act immediately, it takes a couple of minutes to come online, assess the situation with logic and then make decisions.

So, think of the limbic system as a toddler who hears the word 'no' and immediately starts screaming, kicking and flailing. And the prefrontal cortex as the adult who takes in the information, assesses it and then decides how to proceed. Now, let's apply all of this to what is happening for our children during a meltdown. The limbic system has sensed danger, this could range from being told no, sensory overload or trying to avoid a non-preferred activity. The fight, flight response is activated, adrenalin and cortisol flood the bloodstream resulting in intense physical and emotional responses.

Think of a situation of jamming on the brakes to avoid a car crash, not that that's ever happened to me. The sudden rush of adrenalin, your heart racing, your hands shaking, your breath quickening. This is a really intense reaction.

Ep #2: Your Child's Behavior Is Not Personal

Now, imagine this for our children who have a lot of sensory issues that cause them to feel and experience the world more intensely. So, what do they do? Do they take you aside and let you know that they are having a stress response and ask you for assistance in regulating? Or do they patiently wait for you to intuit their distress? No, they light it up. They do whatever they can to express their discomfort and enlist you in making it go away. They hit, yell, scream and throw things.

Going back to the example of my client's child who threw the remote. He was in a stress response when she entered the room. He was offline and just reacting. The behavior for sure involved her because she got smacked with a remote but it wasn't about her. Now, this doesn't mean we don't get mad or discipline our kids for inappropriate behavior. What it really needs is that we don't layer the behavior with judgment of them, ourselves and our parenting.

So, what to do. For me I have found a lot of relief in understanding more clinically what is happening for my son during a meltdown. The 10,000-foot view has helped me get better at separating his behaviors from who he is or making them mean anything about him, or me, or my parenting. I'm a very visual person so I like to picture what is happening in his brain and in his nervous system as much as I can.

One of the hacks that I use to depersonalize behaviors is from an online program created by positive psychologist, Renee Jain called GoZen. GoZen uses cartoon skits to teach children how to transform anxiety into courage, confidence and resilience.

In the Worry Program the characters show a boy who is afraid of dogs, what happens inside of his brain when he feels anxiety, by introducing him to his limbic system and his prefrontal cortex. The characters explain that the limbic brain which is responsible for keeping us alive does not rely on logic and it makes quick decisions based on perception of danger. While the prefrontal cortex, the newest part of the brain uses logic to make decisions.

Ep #2: Your Child's Behavior Is Not Personal

When the limbic brain perceives a threat the character runs over, hits an alarm activating the fight, flight response. From there, swoosh, the brain releases chemicals into the bloodstream preparing the body to fight or flee. At the same time the limbic brain character rushes over to the computer labeled 'prefrontal cortex' and shuts it down saying, "No time to wait for you to boot up, I'm taking over." It's an entertaining little visual, alarm goes off, prefrontal cortex shuts down and fear and anxiety are running the show.

When I can view my son's behaviors through this lens it reminds me that it's not personal. He is experiencing an intense emotional and physical reaction made all the more intense by his sensory issues that he's unable to manage. In addition, his thinking brain is offline so he is unable to access his rational thinking or his strategies. This is not personal, helps me slow down my racing thoughts and my urge to control him. As a result, I'm not melting down right alongside of him and I'm able to make decisions from my rational brain.

Of course, this is not all the time, sometimes my stress response is triggered and I react. Still, it is worthwhile to begin to practice the skill of depersonalizing your child's behavior in any way that you can. The more you do this the easier it will be for you to respond.

Before I go I want to tell you how you can enter to win a fabulous gift package. I'm going to be giving away three self-care packages to three lucky listeners who follow, rate and review the show. These gift packages will be from Duross & Langel in Philadelphia which is one of my favorite places on Earth. I'd love for it to be a five-star review, of course, although it doesn't have to be. I want you to be honest with your feedback so I can create a show that provides tons of value.

Visit theautismmomcoach.com/podcastlaunch to learn more about the contest and how to enter. I'll be announcing the winners on the show in upcoming episodes. Thank you for listening.

Ep #2: Your Child's Behavior Is Not Personal

Thanks for listening to The Autism Mom Coach. If you want more information or the show notes and resources from the podcast, visit theautismmomcoach.com. See you next week.