

## Ep #55: Words Matter: Autism & Aggression



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With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You're listening to episode 55 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Words Matter.

Let's talk about aggression. How we talk about our children's behaviors is very important because words matter. Words can convey so much meaning in just a couple of syllables. So it matters a lot, the kinds of words that we are using to describe, explain, diagnose and understand something that we truly don't. In my opinion, words like aggression and violence are overused and improperly used as descriptors for the behaviors of people with Autism.

These words do not provide the proper lens for the behaviors and results in us judging our children and ourselves rather than focusing our efforts on the ways that we can better understand and support our children when they are dysregulated. So let's talk about it. Let's talk about the words that we use and how we can begin to shift our language, our thinking and our advocacy to best support ourselves and our children. Stay tuned.

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.

Hello everyone and welcome to the podcast. I am so glad you're here and I hope you are doing well. And today we're going to get to it, we're going to talk about a controversial topic and that is Autism and aggression but first a story. When my son was about four years old we went trick or treating with my best friend and her eight year old daughter who was dressed up in a very elaborate princess outfit with a witch hat, not really positive which she was but it was pretty cool.

Anyhow my son was intrigued by the hat and he tried to grab it from her a few times but each time she moved away until of course he got it from her. He lunged for her, he grabbed it right off of her head which was pretty

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painful for her because it would bobby pinned into her hair. And he placed it on his head and walked around with it proudly. So of course my friend's daughter was really upset and she was yelling about how mad she was at him and that he did it on purpose.

And my friend said to her daughter, "No, calm down, you're fine and he didn't do it on purpose." Well, this eight year old shot back, "What do you mean he didn't do it on purpose? Me marched up to me, he grabbed it off my head, he meant it alright." And in that moment so many feelings hit my body all at once. On one hand I totally saw her point. How do you explain to an eight year old? How do you explain to anyone, behavior that looks willful, that looks purposeful is because of something other than an intent to do harm? Impossible.

So I was agreeing with her, I was feeling bad for her. I was sympathizing with her because she's a good kid and that hurt. And at the same time looking at my son with a lot of fear, how would his behavior be interpreted as a four year old, as a 14 year old and now as a 15 year old? I'm still living this. But I know in that moment when he was four years old, I imagined it playing out from that point on, how would he be perceived, how would people treat him?

And I see this in my clients too, whether their child is two, 12 or 20 years old. there is the fear that our children's behaviors will be misinterpreted. Their low frustration tolerance, their impulsivity, that that will be viewed as an intent to harm other people, to be a violent person. We fear that this will result in consequences that they don't understand, that they don't comprehend and of course fear of all fears, consequences that we can't protect them from or easily fix.

So this is all to say that any conversation around behaviors is triggering, it's personal, it's one that so many of us either live with or lived in fear of. That said, I want to address this conversation in and of itself, how we talk about our children's behaviors, how we talk about dysregulated behaviors. I think this is really important. I think that the language that we use is so important

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because our language, how we think about things creates an emotional experience for us.

Words have meanings and not all words are created equally. Words like violence and aggression often create a visceral feeling in our body. We know it when we see it and we know it when we feel it. But in my opinion, these words, aggression and violence are not appropriate and they are definitely not helpful ways for us the parents to think about our children's dysregulated behaviors.

So first let's talk about why I don't think they're appropriate. I'm a stickler for definitions, it's the lawyer in me. And when I think of aggression which is defined as a type of behavior intending to cause physical or mental harm, or violence which is defined as a behavior involving physical force intended to harm, damage or kill another person. Well, I don't view behaviors related to Autism in the same vein. I don't look at these behaviors as an intent to harm.

I look at them more as an attempt to control the environment, to communicate, to avoid a non-preferred activity or just a result of being overflooded with sensory input. And our children have low frustration tolerances and they have quite a bit of impulsivity. So all of this together I don't see it as intent to harm. Now, maybe you're saying, "Well, wait, do you mean that it's not violent or aggressive when my child punches me in the face, throws a TV against the wall, kicks the dog, pulls their sister's hair or pinches me until I bleed?"

If you are sitting there thinking words-schmerds, I know violence when I see it and especially when I feel it. I understand I really do. Some of these examples are mine. But here is what I really do believe. Describing these behaviors and describing our children as violent or aggressive. This is not helpful to us in the sense that these words have the power to completely cloud the lens through which we think about our own children. When we are viewing behaviors through the lens of intent to harm it is really, really hard to think well of our kids and ourselves as parents.

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By contrast, when we are viewing these behaviors through the lens of the Autism diagnosis, when we are viewing these behaviors through the brain and nervous system lenses that this person is dysregulated. They do not have access to the part of their brain where rational thinking resides. Their body is flooded with stress hormones and this is resulting in intense, physical and emotional reactions. When we're looking at it through these lenses we can get curious to understand what is happening versus simply judging the behaviors and the person, our child as violent.

So what to do. There really are no easy answers here. Aggression, violence, these words mean something to us instantly. They communicate so much. They pack a punch, if you will. Unfortunately I have not come across a single word that adequately captures all the complexities of behaviors resulting from Autism dysregulation.

As unwieldy as it is I do think a better way to refer to violence or aggression is to call it dysregulated behavior. This does not flow off the tongue, I know but the more we work to reframe how we think about our children's behaviors the better able we will be to keep our cool with them and advocate for their needs. We can also begin to use this language in conversations with staff, teachers, friends and family.

That said, and this really is my personal opinion, I use the word 'aggression' with doctors. They recognize it and I am very detailed with doctors, especially the ones prescribing medications about the exact behaviors in order to best inform treatment decisions. But in everyday conversations when I am talking to my clients, when I am talking to my coach, when I'm talking to my friends about things that are going on, I do not use the words aggression or violence.

And when people use those words with me, even the doctors, I pause because I have gotten so used to not thinking of it in that way that when other people use those words I will either speak up and say something or I just now recognize how far I've come. And it has helped me to not look at it that way because what I've seen in myself and what I see in my clients, especially the clients who their child has not really had any issues with

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dysregulated behaviors involving another person. But they fear it so much because they've read the stories, they've seen the Facebook posts.

And so then their child does the littlest thing and the parent whose so hypervigilant is all over them and they're just living in fear of what if, what if, what if. And I think that's what happens when we're thinking about these words in terms of aggression and violence because they are such anti-social words. They have a broad range of consequences that are very scary to parents raising children who just don't get it. So, yes this is hard.

This is an ongoing struggle that we all have but I do think that the part that we can play is reshaping how we think about these behaviors in our brains and how we communicate to others and how we let them communicate to us about our children.

Alright, that is it for this week. I know that this is a highly charged topic so I imagine that this will not be the first podcast I do on this topic. In the meantime if you want to learn more about what I teach my clients to do while their child is dysregulated, go onto my website, [theautismmomcoach.com](http://theautismmomcoach.com) and you can grab my free course, *Keeping Your Cool During an Autism Meltdown*.

Also if you are ready to do this work with me as your one-on-one coach, schedule a consultation on my website. I coach moms like you every day. The mom who is struggling with a child who is very dysregulated. The mom who's wondering if she's doing enough or the right things. The mom who is catastrophizing the future, all of it. I handle all of this in my one-on-one coaching program and the results speak for themselves. If you are interested, sign up on my website and let's go. Alright, talk to you next week.

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](http://theautismmomcoach.com). See you next week.