

Ep #72: Your Child's Behavior Is Not Personal (MVP)



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 72 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Your Child's Behavior Is Not Personal.

In this week's episode we are going to do a replay of episode two of the podcast, which is, I think, probably the most important episode of all of these podcasts because it encompasses so much. When we take our child's behaviors personally, we make them personal. We make them about our child, we make them about us, we make them about our parenting. And all of this serves to dysregulate us so we are not able to show up with our rational brains.

Instead we are reacting with sadness, with fear or with anger. I think that this thought is really the best strategy all of us can incorporate into our lives when we are dealing with difficult behaviors. And I say this as someone with a lot of experience with behaviors, with behaviors that are directed at me, at my body, at my belongings. This is not theoretical to me, I am not saying this to gaslight you or to diminish your experience because I understand it.

But what I do know for sure is that when we're thinking of behaviors as being personal, it really does nothing to help us, in fact, just the opposite. The more we think that this is personal, it's about our child, it's about our kid, it's about our parenting, the more dysregulated we get. And you know how that goes, especially during a meltdown, your child's dysregulated, you're dysregulated, no one's in charge, it's not a good scene. And look, I know that none of this is as easy as just tell yourself it's not personal and everything will be okay.

To be sure, when we are in the middle of something that is dangerous and aggressive, first things first, safety, protect yourself, protect your child. But when it is over, I urge you, do not sit too long in the misery of this is personal because it's like quicksand, it won't help you, it won't help your child. Now, I experience this and it is not my favorite thing to experience but I do remind myself, the reason it's me, the reason I'm the target is because I'm his person like we talked about in the last episode. I am the fixer in his mind. I am his ride or die, so to speak.

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And so when he is looping, when he is frustrated and I can't resolve it, or he's not getting the resolution that he wants and I'm there, well, I'm the target. It's not because he doesn't love me, it's not because he's a bad kid. It's because low frustration tolerance, low impulse control and other issues working together and boom.

I try my best when these things have passed to remind myself, it is not personal because even if I can't get myself there, even if I actually don't believe this in the moment because God damn, it feels personal. Especially when you're icing your face, it feels personal. I remind myself that there is no good to come of this. Believing it's personal, that's just not helpful, it's not going to help me take care of myself. It's not going to help me get back up and take care of him.

And so I urge you, whatever your situation is, really check yourself whenever you are internalizing the behavior, whenever you're making it about you, whenever you're even making it about your child. And remind yourself that whatever they are doing is about their dysregulation and their poor inability in that moment to manage it. So with that, let's listen to episode two, It's Not Personal.

Welcome to *The Autism Mom Coach* podcast, I am your host, Lisa Candra. I am a lawyer, a life coach, and most importantly, I am the full-time single mother of a teenager with Autism and other comorbid diagnoses. I know what it is like to wonder if you are doing enough or the right things for your child and to live in fear of their future.

I also know that constantly fueling yourself with fear and anxiety is not sustainable for you or of any benefit to your child. That is why in this podcast I will share practical strategies and tools you can use to shift from a chronic state of fight, flight to some calm and ease. You are your child's greatest resource, let's take care of you.

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

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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.

So, my client's son is 12 years old and he loves playing video games. 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.

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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.

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. Adrenaline 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, adrenaline and cortisol flood the bloodstream resulting in intense physical and emotional responses.

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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.

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

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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.

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.

Thanks for listening to *The Autism Mom Coach*. If you are ready to apply the principles you are learning in these episodes to your life, it is time to schedule a consultation call with me. Podcasts are great but the ahas are fleeting. Real change comes from application and implementation and this is exactly what we do in my one-on-one coaching program. To schedule your consultation, go to my website, theautismmomcoach.com, Work With Me and take the first step to taking better care of yourself so that you can show up as the parent you want to be for your child with Autism.