

Ep #122: Emotions Are Contagious



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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You are listening to Episode 122 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Emotions Are Contagious.

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. In this podcast, I am going to share with you the tools and strategies you need, so you can fight like hell for your child without burning out. Let's get to it.

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the podcast. I am so glad you're here, and I hope you're doing well. Since the last podcast aired, I did a live training on keeping your cool during a meltdown. It was really well attended. There were lots of great questions, and I've gotten a lot of emails and DM's from folks who couldn't make it.

And so, I will be reoffering a live training of Keeping Your Cool in July. I might just do one in August, too. I haven't decided on the dates yet, but to be the first to know, join my email list. Go to my website, TheAutismMomCoach.com, wait for the pop-up to appear, enter your email address, and you will be the first to know.

So, one of the things that we talked about during the Keeping Your Cool webinar was the science behind meltdowns. I think this is so important to understand more deeply than we do. All of us have heard the term "stress response" and "fight-flight", and we think we understand what's happening. But so often, we just have a general sense.

I know that it's so important for us to deeply understand what is happening for us and for our children in order for us to stay calm during a meltdown. Because this really goes beyond fight-flight. We are parents of children with autism, so everything is a bit extra, and this includes meltdowns.

Why is this? Well, there are a couple of reasons. One, because of their autism, our children are more susceptible to meltdowns, dysregulation, to being flooded by their emotions.

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The second, a lot of parents of kids with autism experience PTSD because they are in a constant state of hyper-vigilance. Maybe their child's a bolter, maybe there's self-injury, there's aggression. There are so many reasons that we are hypersensitive to what our kids are doing, and that makes us more susceptible to our own dysregulation.

Finally, emotional contagion, the topic of today's episode. Emotions are contagious. This goes for every human being. But, like I said, when it comes to autism and autism parenting, it is extra. And there are actually studies to support this. Before I get into definitions and the science and the studies behind emotional contagion, I want to give you an example of what it looks like.

So, a few years ago, my son and I were driving home from an amusement park in the evening, it was pretty late, and we were stopped at a stoplight. Out of nowhere, we heard screeching tires, the smash, and we jolted forward. My initial reaction was, "Oh my, God!" It freaked me out because it came out of nowhere, and I was concerned. "Are we okay? Is my son okay?"

Well, of course, because I freaked out with the "Oh my, God!", my son immediately reacted to my reaction. He got upset, "Oh my, God! Are we in trouble? Did we do something wrong?" He was starting to become really dysregulated. In just one instant he was reacting to my reaction. And because I was freaking out, he started to freak out.

Why is this? Because emotions are contagious. We all know this intuitively. We have all experienced what this is like, to observe our child in distress and feel stressed ourselves. So, why is this? According to neuroscience, our brains contain cells called "mirror neurons" that fire both when we perform an action and when we observe someone else performing the same action. This includes emotions.

We perceive another person experiencing an emotion, we feel it, and many times, what do we do? We mirror it. So, we hear a judgmental tone from our in-laws, "Do you really think your child should be spending so much

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time on their laptop?” We hear the judgment in their voice. We perceive it by their tone and the way they're saying it. And what happens? We give it right back to them, either out loud or in our head. We feel judgmental of them. We give it right back.

Or when you walk into a restaurant and you're greeted by a hostess with a great, big smile. Well, you smile back. You sense the joy, you sense that they're welcoming, and you mirror that right back. Another example could be your partner comes home from work and they just have “the look”. And you know that look, the “Not now. I don't want to talk.”

Let's say your partner walks into a room and they just have that air about them; they're shut down, they're not speaking, they're not looking at you. And when you perceive that, you perceive their shutdown. You perceive them pushing away. Well, you're going to feel that too. And unless you are in a really regulated and zen state, you're probably going to mirror back that behavior right to them.

This is how humans work. It's not novel to certain situations or relationships, it's just our brain wiring. Now, we add autism and autism parenting, and things are just extra. Published studies have found a bidirectional relationship between parental stress and behavior problems in children with autism.

This means that not only can our children's emotions and behavior impact us, but that our stress can impact them and their behaviors. And then, you add that unique connection that all of us have with our children, and this makes us even more vulnerable to absorbing and amplifying their emotions.

So, emotional contagion between us and our kids is a two-way street. What does this mean? Well, let me first tell you what it doesn't mean. This is not the part where you start blaming yourself for losing your shit on your kid or not being a Zen master. That's not realistic, and it's not helpful. Rather, you can use this knowledge and this information and leverage it for yourself and your child.

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Specifically, when you learn how to emotionally regulate yourself, you can create a more stable environment for your child. You can be the solid object for them. They can be worrying out of control and dysregulated, but when you are standing firm and strong, and flexible at the same time, and modeling emotional regulation to them, they will mirror that back. Maybe not right away, maybe not as fast as you'd like, but it will have an impact. And if nothing else, it's not going to escalate them.

Now, this does not mean that you suppress your emotions, or put on a fake happy smile when you are falling apart inside. Our kids are too smart for that, and they sense it. I know my kid senses it. Sometimes, when I'm just gritting my teeth, he knows. He knows, he calls me on it, and he reacts to it. This is not about 'faking it till you make it,' it's about developing strategies for emotional regulation that you practice and practice and practice until they become second nature to you.

This is really similar to the work that we do with our children when we're trying to teach them any skill. We don't expect them to pick it up in a minute and integrate it into their life. We expect that it's going to take time and repetition. It's the same thing here, especially because we are working against our biology.

We're working against that default way our nervous system wants us to react. We're working against all of those default negative thoughts. So, this is work, it is real work. It's tearing down and it's rebuilding. But the more you do this, the better able you are to regulate yourself when your child is escalated, the better able you will be to down-regulate them and model the emotional regulation skills that you want them to mirror back to you.

So, let me give you an example of my favorite way to do this. This is what I call the "two for one". Anytime I'm having an experience where I'm feeling stressed and I'm feeling dysregulated, I try to narrate through the experience for my son. One example of this is when I was getting certified as a life coach. I had to submit peer coaching recording. And this was pre-pandemic, during the early days of using Zoom, and I was not proficient in it at all.

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My son was waiting for me, we were going somewhere or another, and I kept telling him to wait because I had to upload this recording. I'm not exactly sure of the sequence of events, but all of a sudden, I could not find the recording that I was looking for. I wasn't sure if I actually had recorded it, I wasn't sure where it was, and I was starting to panic.

As I was doing this, I stopped myself because my son was observing me. At that time, my son was having a lot of anxiety about work on his laptop and not being sure if he had actually submitted it or not. And so, the last thing I wanted to do in front of him was have a technology freak-out on my laptop and just reinforce to him that this is scary.

Instead, I started to talk through it. I was like, "You know what? It's fine. It's not a big deal. I'm sure the recording is somewhere. But if it's not, I can just call up my coaching partner and she probably has the recording. And even if she doesn't, the worst-case scenario is that I just pick another recording. That's totally fine. It's not a problem."

Now, notice what I wasn't doing. I wasn't raising my voice to myself. I wasn't talking to myself in a scolding kind of a way. Instead, my voice was very calm, it was very sedate and almost melodic. And that was intentional; because voice, tone, prosody, volume, signal, safety. And so, I knew that when my son was hearing my voice in that way, that that was going to be a signal to him, "This is fine. It's not a problem. It's not a reason to freak out."

But here's why it's a two for one. It was doing the exact same thing for me and for my nervous system. I have a nervous system just like he does, and my nervous system responds to volume, in response to tone, in response to being judged, and in response to being scolded. And so, not only was I lowering the volume for him, I was lowering the volume for myself. This is why, again, I call it a "two for one".

And look, this is not always going to be the outcome. But in this specific case, my son actually said to me, "Wow, that's a really good lesson for me." I couldn't have written it better. I was like, "Yes! Exactly! Message received." I was so excited; teachable moment.

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Now, I've done this a million times and not every situation has turned out that way. But every time that I do that, even if I am not calming him down as fast as I would like, I am calming myself down. And when that happens, I am widening my capacity, I am increasing my patience and my ability to model regulation to him.

To sum up, emotions are contagious. By focusing on our own emotional regulation, we're not just helping ourselves, we're actively supporting our children and their ability to regulate. And we're modeling to them emotional regulation and emotional regulation skills. This is not a quick fix. Like any skill, emotional regulation takes repetition and practice.

So, what does this mean? It means that if you have a couple of good days and then a couple of bad days, that that's exactly how it goes. That's not regression. That's not failure. That's not two steps forward and two steps back. That is how it goes. It's kind of like riding a bike; just like anything. I learned to walk years and years and years ago, and I'd still trip and fall. Does it mean I regressed? No, that's just to be expected.

Alright, that is it for this week's episode. If this is something you struggle with... If you struggle with staying calm when your child is dysregulated... If you have a hard time managing your own emotions and your own anxiety, this is exactly what I can help you with. It's exactly what I do in my one-on-one coaching program, The Resilient Autism Mom program. Where we focus on managing stress, teeming anxiety, and preventing burnout.

All of the skills that you learn in my program are the foundation for everything you do with your child, from teaching them how to self-soothe and regulate themselves, and cope with their own distress, to advocating for them, to being their champions, to being their voice. All of the skills that I teach you will help you help them, in a way where you will actually have more energy.

And the reason is this. I am going to teach you how to stop wasting so much time second guessing yourself, judging yourself, shaming yourself. All of that takes time; it takes actual minutes, actual hours. But it takes

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more than that. Any time that you spend doing that is a drag. It tanks your energy, it erodes your confidence, and it undermines your ability to show up as the parent your child needs.

So, this is not work that you have to do alone, I am here to help you. And the first step is to schedule your consultation call. Now, a consultation call is for *you*. It's for you to share with me what you're struggling with, where you are, and where you want to be. And from there, I'm going to lay out the steps that you need to take in order to get where you want to be, whether you work with me or not.

There's no time better than the present. If this feels like something that you need, schedule your consultation with me. You can go to the episode notes. Or you can go to my website, TheAutismMomCoach.com, and you can find a time on my calendar.

Now, if you don't find a time on my calendar, you can always email me at Lisa@theautismmomcoach.com. Tell me two dates and times that work for you, and I will work with you to make one of those work.

Alright, that is it for this week. I will talk to you next. Have a great week.

Thanks for listening to *The Autism Mom Coach*. If you're 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 “a-ha's” 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.