

## Ep #130: Behavior Barometers



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With Your Host

Lisa Candra

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You are listening to episode 130 of *The Autism Mom Coach*, Behavior Barometers.

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 are here and I am so excited to share with you a tool that I use with my clients all of the time and that is called a behavior barometer. Before I get into what a behavior barometer is, I want to talk to you about why I use it. And really it's because I talk about meltdowns all day, every day with lots of moms in lots of different scenarios.

And what I've noticed among my moms is that they use the word, meltdown to describe a variety of different behaviors. All that fit under the umbrella of a meltdown, but with very varying intensities. And so, I have made it my mission, when I talk about meltdowns with my clients to get very data specific about how long the meltdown or the behavior occurred, the intensity, etc., because not all meltdowns or behaviors are created equally.

And if we are describing everything our child does that we don't love as a meltdown, even if it technically is a meltdown, I think that this can be a disservice both to us and to our children. In the Autism community, the word meltdown is often used as a catch all term for when our children lose control. It conjures up images of a child who is overwhelmed by their emotions, inconsolable and potentially engaging in challenging or dangerous behaviors. So, in other words, this one word connotes a very scary, stressful, and stigmatizing event.

So, when we are using this word to describe any time our child becomes dysregulated, it can create more feelings of overwhelm in us. And that is because of the power of language, of human language. We use language to describe our reality, but it not only describes it, it shapes it. And I talked

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about this several episodes before when I was talking about aggression. When you're talking about a child's behavior as being aggressive, it starts to shape the way you think about the child as an aggressive child, a violent child, and with that comes a lot of baggage.

And I think the same is true for the term meltdown in the Autism community. So, to better explain what I'm talking about, this is where the concept of cognitive framing comes into play. Cognitive framing is a psychological principle that shows us that how we present information, including the words that we use, influences our thoughts and our feelings.

So, when we are labeling every instance of dysregulation as a meltdown, we are framing it in a way that can heighten our own stress response and feelings of being overwhelmed. Because the word itself carries a very heavy emotional weight. In the Autism community for so many of us, it is associated with fear, with stress, with stigma, with being judged, with being outcasted. So, by changing our language, we change our perceptions.

When we perceive situations less catastrophically, we're better equipped to handle them calmly and effectively. And this not only helps us as the parent, but it also creates a more supportive environment for our children because we all know that if they sense our stress and our fear and our overwhelm, they react to it. So, what to do. First, I'm not suggesting that we mix the term meltdown, I think that it's a very helpful term in our community because it connotes something beyond a tantrum and I think that that is really important.

But what I also think is important is for us to get very data specific and rate what type of a meltdown it is for our child based on our knowledge of our child, so that informs how we respond. Because whether this is a low grade meltdown or a high grade meltdown, we are going to get triggered and when we get triggered, we go into reaction mode.

So, the entire point of creating a scale ahead of time when you're not in reaction mode is to think through clearly what is happening during these different meltdowns? What are the signs of these meltdowns? How do they

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usually resolve? What's helpful? What's not helpful? And so that you can start to see ahead of time that, yeah, meltdowns might happen regularly, but I also handle them and I know how to do it, even if I don't want to, I know how. And that's a really important piece in growing your own confidence and your ability to handle when your child is dysregulated.

So, what I have done for myself and what I do for my clients is create a behavior scale, a scale from one to five. And this is a way to assess the intensity of the situation and also adjust expectations for ourselves and our children and to act accordingly.

So first, what is a behavior barometer? Like I said, it's a tool to measure behavior intensity in an objective manner. When we do this, it reduces our stress response by framing the event more neutrally. This is a one. This is a two, this is a three, as opposed to they're melting down and I don't know what to do. It helps us differentiate between various levels of challenging behavior because like I said, not all behaviors, not all meltdowns are created equally, and it guides appropriate responses for us based on the behavior and its severity.

So behavioral barometers like everything in Autism, are individualized to each child. There is no one size fits all. And for each number on the scale, what we are doing is sussing out what the child is doing based on severity, don't do the behavior barometers or individualized.

So why is a behavioral barometer important? It's important because it addresses our tendency to label all challenging behaviors as meltdowns that can lead to us treating all behaviors with the same level of urgency or concern, which isn't appropriate or helpful.

This is not a perfect analogy, but what comes to mind is that saying, when the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And I kind of think of that with behaviors and meltdowns if the only way that we're responding to it is a four alarm fire, then we could have a really outsized response to a problem that didn't need a hammer. It actually needed a fly swatter.

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It can also lead to thinking about all behaviors as the same, which is dangerous because how we think creates our emotions. And the more we think of behaviors and meltdowns as big and intense, the more we dread them, but the more we are triggered by them. The more we are triggered by them, the more disproportionately we react and overreact to them.

So, the behavior barometer helps us avoid this because it differentiates behaviors and gives us a more objective tool for measuring them when we feel triggered. And again, it helps us respond in a more proportionate manner. So, we're not using a sledge hammer when a fly swatter would suffice. Or we're not jumping in to fix it when we could just let our kid cry for three minutes and get over it themselves.

So, when you do this, here's what happens. It builds your confidence as a parent because it's going to show you that you can handle a lot of situations pretty well. And it helps you gain perspective on what truly is a big deal. And it provides an objective evaluation tool for you when you are emotionally triggered.

So, for instance, your child crying at Target because they can't get a toy or a candy, while really uncomfortable, might only be a two or a three. Now, that intensity might increase for you because of other people looking, but that's not because of the behavior itself. It's because of your reaction to the judgment that you are fearing from others. And so that behavior can feel like a bigger deal than it actually is because you've layered on this extra fear of the judgment.

What I like for my clients to do as best they can using this barometer is to focus only on the behavior. What is actually happening and what is the next right thing based on what I know about my kiddo. So, I encourage you to give it a try and to create your own barometer. And to help you with that, I have a little something for you that is in the episode notes, you can download it now. It's your own behavior barometer and this barometer on a one to five, I created some suggestions for you of what a one, two, three, four and five might look like.

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Now, again, this is individualized to your child and you can use this and mold it however you want. This is just guidance. But what I do want you to know, when I do a behavior barometer, the lowest point on the scale, a one is when your child is regulated. And this is really important that you know how to recognize when they are regulated. You want to know what they look like when they are regulated. What do they do? What don't they do? How do they act? What is their body language like? Are they communicative? Are they responsive? Are they relaxed? Are they laughing?

And the more in tune you are with what your child looks like in their regulated state, the easier it is going to be for you to pick up when they start creeping up the scale of intensity of the behavior barometer. So again, go to the show notes and you can download your own behavior barometer now. It is two parts, so the first page is the guidance that I give you on my thoughts about what a one through five would look like. Again, you get to mold that to your child.

And then the second page is a blank behavior barometer for you to fill in for yourself. Maybe you put that on your refrigerator door. Maybe you share it with your child's school team for this year. You can do whatever you want with it. You can make as many copies as you like.

Alright, finally, if you want to do this work with me, you can. You don't have to do this alone. In fact, when you work with a coach, you guarantee that you accelerate your results. By working with me as your one-on-one coach, you will not only have my support and my guidance, you will also be invited into my private membership community of current and past coaching clients where we meet on a weekly basis for coaching, for support. We have guest speakers in our community.

And we have our own little online community through the circle app. Members can ask me for coaching any time they like, day or night, and they can also ask for support from one another. They can share wins with one another. They can learn from one another. And this has been such an

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amazing add to my coaching program because not only do you get all the strategies, tools and resources that I teach.

You get to immerse yourself in a community of women who are doing the same thing or who are supporting one another and who can finish your sentence and how nice is that? Because one thing that we have all experienced in this Autism journey is that it can be isolating. That's why I am so pleased to combine the support that I give to my clients on a one-on-one basis with this community. Because not only are you seen and heard by me, you are seen and heard by your peers and you know that you're not alone.

Alright, so if you are ready to transform your Autism parenting experience and learn more tools and strategies to help you show up as the calm, confident mom you want to be. You can schedule your one-on-one consultation with me right now by going to the episode notes. If you've never been on a coaching consultation, I am happy to tell you what it's like with me. It's a conversation. I want to know what you're struggling with, what you want help with, what you want support with. And if I think I can help you, I am going to tell you exactly how.

Now, if you've never been on a coaching consultation before, it is a no pressure conversation with me. You get to share what you're struggling with, what you hope to achieve and we will talk about whether or not my coaching program makes sense for you. Again, to schedule your consultation call, go to the episode notes and I hope to talk to you soon. Alright everyone, have a great week and I will talk to you next.

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](http://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.