

NEUROBIOLOGY OF PEACEFUL PARENTING:

Empathy & Responsiveness

(Audio Transcript)

Hello, I'm Dr. Laura Markham, and our challenge today is about **Responsiveness and Empathy**.

Did you know that parenting responsively actually changes your child's nervous system and brain so that they're more able to self-regulate and more resilient? That's right! Here's how it works.

Responsiveness means being sensitive to what your child is needing or expressing, and responding to that appropriately and consistently. So this is both cognitive -- You recognize your child's thoughts and feelings; you wonder about what could be causing them to behave in a certain way. But it's also affective. You respond with an appropriate emotion with empathy and understanding. When you're interacting with your child and you're able to respond empathically, you're communicating understanding, you're creating connection and safety.

So what happens in your child's nervous system? Well, to start with, your connection increases oxytocin. That helps your child feel safe, connected, trusting, it reduces their anxiety, and it also creates more cooperation because there's no sense of threat.

In fact, the neural response to threat -- any cues of threat like asking them to take a bath or do anything else they don't want to do, that's usually a cue that there's some sort of a threat to them - the neural response to threat is reduced when you parent responsively. When children are dysregulated, remember, they're actively trying to protect themselves against either a real or a perceived threat. So when they feel understood, they don't need to protect themselves so much, so they're not as overreactive.

Another thing that happens in the nervous system that's related to this is that the nervous system might've been in fight or flight when you ask them to take that bath, and that's a sympathetic activation. It could even have been in a shutting down or a giving up mode. That's a parasympathetic dorsal vagal reaction. And when your child's in one of those places, they either feel hopeless and they've given up, like they just can't find any strength to do something, or they're ready to fight with you, or they're ready to run away.

But when you parent responsively, the nervous system actually shifts from sympathetic activation or dorsal vagal, it shifts into what we call ventral vagal. That's parasympathetic also, but it's about can-do, it's about social connection. And once the child feels they have a social connection with you, they have back-up, they have someone on their side.

So your child shifts into this can-do attitude of more curiosity, more relaxation, more learning. The digestion begins to work better, the immune system begins to work better. The nervous system actually shifts into a more relaxed place where your child is feeling better and is more able to handle their life in a constructive way, including to cooperate with you.

We could keep going with all the changes in the nervous system, but we could also just say that it feels good when we receive empathy, when human beings receive empathy! Receiving empathy triggers dopamine and serotonin and the other feel good hormones, and the pleasure centers of the brain light up.

So we know that when your child receives empathy from you, they feel better. You're supporting their nervous system to relax, which supports learning, connection and play, and it buffers against stress. It also creates a secure parent-child attachment. We know that responsiveness is the most important factor in creating a secure parent-child attachment. And we know that a secure attachment is associated with every positive outcome we all want for our kids, from self-esteem to better health, to better peer relationships, being able to manage themselves emotionally, building the circuitry for self-regulation.

So this is our challenge for today: Parent responsively!

And how do you do that actually practically? Well, first of all, get grounded yourself. We're going to talk more later in this challenge about how you can get grounded yourself, how you can be more self-regulated, but you do always have to start from you.

Then to parent responsively, you notice your child's needs, you notice their emotional state. If your child engages in a challenging behavior, you ask yourself, *"I wonder what they might be feeling right now. I wonder what support my child needs to meet my expectations?"* Right? It's not a matter of punishment or bribes to meet our expectations. And we also don't give on our expectations if they're appropriate for that child's developmental stage. Instead, ask *"What support does my child need to meet my expectations?"*

Remember, when a child is dysregulated, they need the support of our calmness because when we're regulated, we co-regulate with them. They borrow our calm, it settles their nervous system. So they learn from that experience what it feels like to settle their nervous system. They learn how to do it. Their nervous system actually learns from the experience of being with *our* calm nervous system.

So what do you actually do? You calm yourself. You then engage with your child. You give them the benefit of the doubt and you recognize that if your child is dysregulated or acting in a way that is not okay with you, they need some support from you to meet your expectations.

So you respond to your child's emotional expressions with acceptance and understanding and empathy. So as opposed to saying to them, *"It's not okay to feel that way. In our house, we don't yell,"* you say, *"Oh, you're yelling. You're pretty upset about this. I really want to hear you. That's loud. It hurts my ears. Let's take a breath. I can listen better if you can lower your voice and stop shouting at me."* But notice I haven't made the child wrong for shouting. I'm saying, *"I hear you're angry. I hear it's a communication. I want to know how I can help you."*

So we're not punishing, we're not rejecting, we're not trying to change the anger. We're not making the anger go away. We're acknowledging the anger, we're accepting the anger, and we're asking how we can support the child so that we can hear what it is.

And then we're supporting the child to meet their need in a healthy way. So maybe this child is angry at the sibling and we say, *"You can tell your sibling what you want and need without attacking them."* We're helping them to express their anger in a way that the sibling can hear it.

We're not making them wrong. Every human relationship will have some conflict and some anger. I'm just using anger as one example of a big emotion that often we have a hard time dealing with, and that often our children are told is not a good thing, it's a bad and wrong thing to get angry.

So one of the things I'm asking you to do in this challenge is to notice your child's feelings. And another is to accept them. And another is to support them to express those emotions so that you can understand them better, but not to shut them down, to welcome all emotions.

What we find is that when we welcome all of our children's emotions, that is the basic building block of the circuitry your child needs in their brain and nervous system for self-regulation. The more comfortable children are with all the full range of their emotions, research shows, the more quickly they learn to manage all of those emotions.

We might be also looking for other ways to support the child to meet their needs. Maybe a child who wants to play online games to connect with their peers, maybe they would benefit from more playtime and real life in person with their peers. A child who's putting down her siblings in an effort to feel important, maybe she needs to feel more seen and valued and important in the family and have more opportunity to demonstrate her own growth and accomplishments and skills so she doesn't have to put her siblings down.

The needs of your child are fine. We're looking for ways to meet those needs that are not destructive to anyone around them or any belongings around them.

Another thing you can do to be responsive to your child in this challenge is when you do need to guide your child's behavior, that's fine -- We are parents, we guide behavior all day every day -- But you're not setting limits on the emotions, just on the behavior. And again, later in this challenge, we're going to talk very specifically about setting limits.

But for today, I'll just say, feelings are not bad and wrong. Feelings, no matter what they are, are information to be heard, witnessed, not driven underground or numbed out. We don't want to teach our children to numb out their feelings. That's where addiction begins. So we are accepting all of the feelings so that our children learn to express them to us, to accept them themselves, and therefore to manage them.

And then after we empathize and accept, we may need to help our child shift gears. We may need to help them to down-regulate. If they're in a frenzied state, we may need to roughhouse with them to move that energy out. We may need to downregulate by creating safety and snuggling and warmth. But we notice the state our child is in, and we respond to that by supporting the child to shift their emotional and physical state.

So the tools you're going to use to do these very hard things I'm describing, you're going to get yourself a little calm and then you're going to use a supportive facial expression, supportive posture. Instead of this (*demonstrates sternness*), you're going to be embracing (*demonstrates embracing arms*) with your warm tone, your loving voice, your sense of humor, and you're going to verbally acknowledge your child's feelings and perspective. It's really that simple. *"You sound really disappointed about this. Tell me more. It sounds like you wish blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,"* whatever that is.

In sum, your empathy creates safety and it settles your child's nervous system. Notice that to do this kind of parenting, we need to self-regulate. It all starts with our own self-awareness and being compassionate to ourselves, and that's one of our upcoming challenges.

So your challenge this week, your number one challenge, is to **Parent Responsively**. I'm Dr. Laura Markham. Thanks for doing this challenge with me. I'll see you on our next challenge where we'll be discussing another parenting hack that supports your child's nervous system: Laughter.

Have a great time being responsive. Thanks for doing this challenge with me!