

NEUROBIOLOGY OF PEACEFUL PARENTING:

Setting Limits

(Audio Transcript)

Hello, I'm Dr. Laura Markham, and our challenge today is about the **Neurobiology of Setting Limits**.

Setting limits is a challenge for most parents. As a parent, you're responsible for guiding your child's behavior, which means that you have to set limits all day, every day. But did you know that the way you set limits can have either a positive or a negative impact on your child's developing brain and nervous system? And how you set limits can either erode your relationship with your child or strengthen it. Setting an empathic limit can have a significant impact on the brain. Here's how it works.

Authoritarian limits look like this: *"Do it my way. My way, or the highway. Get this done now. Get up and do what I say. Don't talk back."* Those kinds of limits can trigger the child's stress response because the child perceives the limit-setting as a threat. If the child is made to feel bad and wrong for what they want, they feel under attack and they get defensive. And children who are anxious often respond with defiance, *"I won't do that,"* because it makes them scared. The child's nervous system responds to the perceived threat, and the threat could just be, *"It's time to take your bath"*, or, *"Get ready for bed"*, or, *"Get ready for school."* The child's nervous system responds to this perceived threat by shifting into fight or flight. The child's body gets flooded with stress hormones like cortisol and all of this makes it much harder for the child to self-regulate.

If stress activation happens, often the brain wires for emergencies. So that's the default response, and that has a negative effect on the brain and nervous system over time.

And because the child doesn't get support to accept and work through big emotions, the child may learn to suppress their emotions. That can lead to all kinds of problems later, like self-medicating because it's so painful. Or the child can become explosive. They don't learn emotional regulation. They don't lay down those neural pathways because they aren't getting support to do it from a calm parent who's co-regulating with them. That function is supplied by the child's parent being empathic to them. And if it's an authoritarian, order-giving kind of a household, the child's not getting that empathy, at least not when tempers are up and they're being told to do something.

Now by contrast, let's look at what happens **when you offer understanding as you set limits**. Your child probably is still disappointed not to get what they want or to have to go do something they don't want to do, but they don't feel like they're bad or wrong for it. They don't get so defensive.

They also feel like you've got their back because you understand. Your empathy creates a sense of safety. It settles the child's nervous system down. They still may not like your limit, but they're more able to accept it because their nervous system hasn't shifted into fight or flight. They're still in the nervous system mode that is more open, more cooperative, more curious, more adapting, more able to play so that if you offer them the opportunity to be playful, even as you're moving toward that bath, they'll take it. Whereas if they're angry or they're digging in their heels and getting defiant, they've moved beyond play and it's very hard to connect with them.

The thing about empathic limits that's so great is, here's the message the child gets: ***“You don't always get what you want. We don't always get what we want, but you get something better. You get someone who understands you and who loves you no matter what.”*** Imagine if you'd had that in childhood. Maybe you were one of the lucky people who did!

By setting the limit in a way that the child gets that as their takeaway message, they can accept the limit and they go along with it. Essentially, they're giving up what they want for something they want more, that warm relationship with us. And that, if you think about it, is the definition of **self-discipline**. *“I'm going to give up what I want, this piece of cake, for something I want actually more, my health.”* So we're choosing the higher value. The child chooses the higher value of their relationship with a warm, loving, empathic parent, even if they really want that thing that they want.

So every time you set a limit in a way that makes it easy for your child to go along with you, and your child chooses to cooperate, your child is developing the parts of the prefrontal cortex that have to do with self-discipline and impulse control. They're growing the neural wiring that they will need for the rest of their life,

They're also developing the parts of the prefrontal cortex that have to do with emotional regulation. By acknowledging and validating the child's emotions and their needs as we're setting limits, we're helping them to learn to recognize and regulate their own emotions in a healthy way. Over time, this emotional regulation contributes to the further development of the prefrontal cortex and the brain regions that are responsible for emotional regulation.

Empathic limits also teach children how to navigate conflict and challenges in a constructive way. In any human relationship, there will always be some challenges and some conflict. So your child is learning that it's possible to express their emotions and their needs while respecting the other person's emotions and needs and respecting boundaries and rules and agreements. This skill, of course, is invaluable for healthy relationships and problem solving for the rest of their life, whether you're talking about peers or school or eventually emotional partnerships like marriage.

Now let's talk about the neurobiology of empathy itself. When we respond to our child's emotions with compassion, with understanding, even when we're setting a limit and guiding their

behavior, we're staying connected. Both of our brains are releasing -- you guessed it -- oxytocin, the love hormone, and that strengthens the trust and emotional security between us.

The child is developing a more positive sense of self-worth because they don't feel bad about themselves, and secure attachment to us, and they're learning that it's okay to express their emotions and get help, seek help when they need help. They're also, because they feel acknowledged and respected and empathized with, they're learning how to use those same skills with other people so that you will see them turn around with their sibling or a playmate and be respectful and compassionate and understanding with someone else.

These repeated experiences of empathic limits create neural pathways that are being strengthened every time they're used for emotional regulation and empathy. Your child's brain is actually becoming wired to respond to challenging situations and big emotions with greater emotional intelligence and with self-regulation!

So how do we set empathic limits? It's pretty simple, really. We just remember to validate the child's feelings and acknowledge their needs. And if you can do that before you've even set the limit, it's great.

1. So you empathize, you offer understanding of what your child wants.
2. Then you set the limit.
3. And then you tell the child what they can do, or you acknowledge how they are responding to the limit that you've set.

Basically, you're giving them the message that you hear them and you're here to help, and you do care about their happiness, even if you're not going to be able to give them this particular thing they want or you are asking them to do this particular thing that they don't want.

So an example, *"You wish you could stay up later, like your older brother. I hear you. And you know just what you would do, you would keep playing those Legos, right? You could probably play Legos all night, couldn't you? And right now it's time for bed. Let's go now so we have time to finish our story from last night."*

Notice that in that not only did I give the child something they could do, they could go now and read the story, but I also really acknowledged their wish. It's almost a magic word when you say to a child *"You wish"*, because they feel heard even when they can't get that thing.

And I also can say to him, *"When you're older like your brother, you'll be able to stay up until eight o'clock also."* So I am giving him some hope for the future. And I'm not making him bad or wrong for wanting to stay up, and I'm not complaining that I had to tell him four times to stop playing the Legos. I'm just holding the line. *"Yep, I know you want to stay up and now it's time to get ready for bed."*

Another example. *"Yes, that cookie does look yummy, doesn't it? But your body needs some healthy fuel. It's almost dinnertime. Let's get something yummy that will help your body."* Now at this point, a toddler who's hungry and also tired might well just dissolve on the floor in tears. They might be kicking and screaming because they can't have the cookie. But that doesn't mean I'm going to give him the cookie. I hear that he really needs it. I hear he really wants it. I understand how yummy it looks and how hungry his body is, and I'm going to allow him to express all that, and he's going to calm down and he's going to feel understood. And then I'm going to get a glass of milk or something else that will fill the body and also help the child feel cared about, but that isn't going to be something that would be bad for him to eat at that time of day.

So you're holding your limit. The fact that you're empathizing doesn't mean you change your limit, but you're still absolutely understanding that *"This really isn't what you wanted. This day is not unfolding the way you wanted it to. I understand."*

And we are also upholding our family rules. So it might be that we are setting a limit with our child about the way they're yelling at their sibling about something that happened, and we say, *"I hear you're really angry at your sibling. It sounds like you have something so important to tell them. You can tell your sibling what you want and need without attacking them. Our family rule is be kind. That means no name-calling."* So we're upholding the limit, but we're acknowledging they have a reason, they have something really important that they want to tell their sibling. *"Let's tell your sibling in a way that she can hear you."*

So you can see that setting limits is a neuroscience-backed approach to guiding our children in daily life in ways that help them grow a healthy nervous system, a resilient nervous system and brain, that they will need to thrive in the world. Not to mention it helps kids cooperate, so it makes life with children a lot smoother!

Notice that to do this kind of parenting, we need to self-regulate, because then if we're not self-regulating, we lose it. We get angry. We're not role modeling what we want to role model, and we certainly can't empathize. Self-regulation starts with being compassionate to ourselves -- which we'll talk about in our next challenge!

Thank you for joining me in exploring the **Neurobiology of Setting Empathic Limits**. As parents, we have the power to shape our kids' brains and hearts through these everyday interactions. What a gift!

Until next time, take care of yourself -- and keep nurturing empathy, one loving limit at a time.