



1023: How to Stay Calm When Your Child is Not With Devon Kuntzman

Child: Welcome to my mommy's podcast!

Katie: This episode is brought to you by Hiya Health. Everyone's talking about their New Year's resolutions, and while everyone else is promising to hit the gym in 2026, I am focusing on something much easier that'll actually stick (gym's already pretty well a habit for me) which is better nutrition for my younger kids.

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This episode is sponsored by BON CHARGE, and I love so many of their products from their red light face mask to their sauna blankets and everything in between. They focus on high-end wellness tech, and if you're interested in how light can help you, which I talk a lot about, BON CHARGE has so much to offer.

Studies have found that specific red light frequencies can help reduce fine lines and wrinkles when used at the correct brightness and strengths. And some products don't get these correct. The frequencies of red and near infrared light stimulate cellular activity at a mitochondrial level, which I talk a lot about on this podcast.

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I'm always a fan of getting natural light from outdoors, but for people who are wanting to kind of tackle the aging process head on, this is in a way to kind of give your body some extra benefit from these specific wavelengths of light.

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Katie: Hello and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com. And I am here today with Devon Kuntzman to tackle the topic of how to stay calm when your child is not. And I love this episode because we get to delve into our own inner responses and what's going on and how we can bring more awareness to that as well as how to show up in support of our kids emotions without condoning their behaviors and how to bring that distinction without shutting down their feelings or leading to patterns of oppression.

As well as how to avoid passing on perhaps things we picked up as a kid or just parenting the way we were parented and so much more. If you're not familiar with Devon I love her work. She's the founder of Transforming Toddlerhood and the original toddler parenting coach on Instagram. I will link to that in the show notes. She's trusted by millions of parents worldwide and she is dedicated to flipping the script on the terrible twos by helping families navigate toddlerhood with confidence and connection. She's also the author of Transforming Toddlerhood. A new book written to support parents with tools, encouragement and fresh perspective. I'll link to that in the show notes as well. Let's jump in.

Devon, welcome. Thanks so much for being here.

Devon: Thank you so much for having me.

Katie: I am excited to dive into these topics because I feel like these are gonna really resonate with any parents listening, and especially parents of young children. And having six kids myself, I know that, like, children can be our perfect mirrors and also exposed to us

the points where we still maybe have some unresolved things going on, or lack of patience, all kinds of things. So in our first episode together, I am really excited to delve into the topic of how to stay calm when your child is not calm. Because certainly every parent has probably experienced this. I know firsthand that obviously in those situations if I don't stay calm, it certainly doesn't help them to find calm.

And if anything it seems to, like, escalate from there. And I know this is a big topic and one that you have a lot of both hands on and research experience with. So to start broad, maybe walk us through some of the framework of things that are going on, when kids are triggered and or when parents respond to those triggers and we'll kind of delve into some practical solutions from there.

Devon: Yeah, absolutely. Well, you know, what we know about young children especially, but in general, anyone who is really feeling frustrated and upset, we're going down into our lower brain, the more primitive part of the brain that's responsible for many bodily functions. And also responsible for our emotions and especially things like fear and our stress response, and so young children, and there, this part of the brain for young children is more developed than the upper areas of the brain that are responsible for higher functions such as impulse control, emotional regulation, planning, things like this, things that young children are really not very good at and that we also can struggle with, especially when we're upset.

So just knowing that whenever we are feeling triggered or frustrated, or when our children are having a big emotional outburst, no one here is bad or wrong. We're going through a biological process where we get stuck in a stress response. And when our children are stuck in that stress response, it is really easy to jump on their emotional rollercoaster and get stuck in that stress response as well.

So if anyone listening finds yourself kind of feeding off of your toddlers big emotions and getting triggered and upset as well, you are not a bad parent. You are a human being.

Katie: Yeah, that's a great thing I think to bring in as context at the beginning of this episode. Because I would guess almost universally as well at least I know from my experience, the times when I haven't parented exactly how I wished I would've. Certainly it's easy to like, feel that guilt and to hold onto those moments. And I've also seen firsthand how when I own those moments and apologize and have conversation actually, like the, there's so much more connection that can come after. But all of those things seem to happen in the after, not in the, like, immediate moment. And to echo what you said, I get it. Like, especially when I had all toddlers I probably heard the question why like literally 400 times a day.

And it is like an uphill climb to maintain patience all the time in certain eras of parenting. But I love that you brought that up. This is a biological process and if we don't do it perfectly, that's not failure. We're human beings, we're learning as we go, just like they are. What are some of the things that we can understand, like you explained the biochemical a little bit what's going on in them and also how these things are mirroring what's going on in us.

I know for me at times it seems like, especially when little kids are chaotic, that it's like triggering something even from my own childhood, like maybe an unmet need from when I was little. That, like, I didn't have the foundation met for me. So I'm like learning in real time how to both meet that need in myself and stay calm and to like model that for my child at the same time.

Devon: Yes, this is what makes parenting so challenging these days is because we know so much more about child development than we did 20 years ago. And so now that we know these things and we're trying to align our parenting practices to really work with a child's development instead of against it, we're finding ourselves not only trying to parent our children, but trying to reparent ourselves because maybe we didn't have some of the tools and skills that we're trying to use modeled for us.

So we're almost fighting against our automatic and ingrained responses and reactions. And so it can be challenging to build those new neuro-pathways and connections in our own brain. Those. New habits and automatic ways of responding while also staying calm and teaching our kids. But this is what is so beautiful about all these challenging moments.

These challenging moments where we're getting frustrated and upset, we could look at them as problems to fix. And then if we didn't, quote unquote fix the problem well, we can get really down on ourselves and down on our child and start telling us stories about ourselves and our kid, how they're bad, or how we're doing a bad job and failing, and we can kind of get stuck looking through the rear view mirror and being in like, what I like to call, woulda, coulda, shoulda land. Like, I should have done this. I could have done that, really beating ourselves up. But the truth is that all of these moments are opportunities for learning and growth. Opportunities for you as the adult to model getting grounded and calming down.

And I can kind of like walk everyone through the process here in a minute. But really modeling these skills where you feel like you're getting triggered, you're getting upset. Maybe you did get upset, and then you're like, whoa, wait a minute. That's not how I wanted to respond. And you're modeling these skills, so you're teaching emotional regulation skills,

relationship skills, social emotional skills, all of these are happening because you're not a perfect parent because you're a human being.

And so. Just even embracing all of these moments as learning opportunities can really change how we feel on a day-to-day basis and even moment to moment basis in the challenges and throes of parenting. And, you know, we wanna talk about, well, what do you do when you feel triggered as well. But I'll, I don't know if you have something that you wanna say before that.

Katie: Yeah, I love that. I think like with, I've used this kind of similar analogy in health, like the questions we ask ourselves internally frame so much of our experience. And when I used to ask like, why can't I get better? What's wrong with me? It was like my subconscious answered those questions. And when I started asking like, how can I thrive?

How can I heal a little bit? Every single day, I started getting better answers because I was asking better questions. And so I think the power of that mental reframe is incredible. I also like to think, you know, back, I used to, I was a perfect parent before I had kids, like I was gonna do everything right, I was, you know, like never gonna say no or yell or all these things. And it's funny how that changes when we're actually in the learning of having a child. So what are some of those new habits we can learn to build? I know you said you'll walk us through the process, but like, what are some of those things we can like, just have it as new habits to build toward?

Devon: Yes. Well, the first habit is absolutely asking the right questions, right? Or asking questions from a place of a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset, which is exactly what you just modeled. Knowing that we can grow, we can learn and we can change, and that so asking those questions is so incredibly important.

The second thing is to start creating that awareness. So we just wanna start realizing whenever we lose it, whenever we get frustrated, when we're getting triggered, even if we realize it five hours later, still acknowledging even to yourself that it happened and is so important. Because if we're not creating specific awareness around the moments that we are getting frustrated and losing our patience, it's really hard to create change because awareness is the first step of creating change.

Now, in an ideal world, we want to really pause, right? And if you read a lot of books and blogs around, you know, positive parenting. Everyone's gonna talk about this pause, right? Okay. We have to pause before we respond. And in theory, pausing sounds so great and it can be super, super challenging. So that's why I started talking about, instead of talking about, okay, we need to pause, I started talking about creating safety as a parent. Because overall our goal is to create physical safety and emotional safety and physical safety is the

precursor to that emotional safety. So we can disrupt the stress response. So for example. If your child's hitting you, you're gonna wanna take a step back, put them down, put like a pillow or a cushion in between the two of you, something so they can no longer hit you.

So then in your brain, you can tell your brain, I am safe. Because when your child's hitting you, there's a threat. Your brain's gonna perceive a threat. And so you have to start disrupting the stress response by creating that physical safety first. Or say your toddler is having a mega tantrum on the floor and you're afraid they're going to like hit their head on like the bricks of the fireplace hearth, or like the corner of a kitchen cabinet.

You've gotta move your toddler somewhere else so they're safe. So then you can tell yourself, everyone is safe. This is not an emergency. Once you create that physical safety, you say, this is not an emergency. I am safe. My child is safe. And you repeat that as many times as you need to in your head and out loud is totally fine.

But that's how we start to disrupt that stress response and start to create time for that pause. So then the next step is really to create that emotional safety. So that might look like validating yourself. You know, no one's gonna come in. Our toddler, our young child is not gonna come up and say, I see you're really feeling frustrated.

This is so frustrating. I mean, as much as we would love someone to come do that for us as an adult, that's our responsibility. So sometimes we just need to say, gosh, I'm feeling really frustrated. I feel like no one is hearing me, or, I feel unheard today. Like no one's listening. Whatever it is that's like really triggering you or frustrating you.

Say it, make an I statement. Validate yourself and then start looking at things that you can do to ground yourself. And I always like to say, write down maybe like five things. Maybe you know that they're helpful or maybe you're like, I need to practice these and try it and see. But write down three to five things.

Put it on, post-it note, put several all over your house so in the heat of the moment, you can see it. You have a visual reminder and then you can start to practice. Like for example, it might be smelling some essential oils. It might be taking deep breaths. It might be tuning into your five senses and thinking about, okay, what can you see? What can you hear? What can you taste? Basically what we wanna do is start redirecting our brain that's like stuck in the stress response loop and redirecting it somewhere else so we can disrupt the cycle of the stress response. And that's how we slowly but surely start to create that pause.

Katie: And I love that because, when, I don't have any data to back this up, but from my own experience and seeing other moms, I really feel like moms are kind of the like nervous system of the home and so the beauty here is like even if we are just doing that internally, it's like that ripples, I feel like, out through the whole house.

And so just like when I'm stressed my kids pick up on that. If I'm calm, it's like that calm ripples through the house. And so I love that you start with addressing our own inner before even taking it to the outer and addressing it in our child. Because I think that's so profound. Even if it's not a like tangible thing that we can like put statistics to, I've seen it over and over in my house.

And I also would love to like double click on one point you made about obviously if a toddler's having a tantrum, make sure they're not gonna injure themselves during the tantrum. But I love that you didn't say like, to like stop the tantrum or try to like tell them to calm down because A, I've never once had that work with a toddler who's having a tantrum, but B, when I was doing my own trauma recovery therapy, one thing I learned in that process was I had locked down emotions at a very young age due to trauma. And so I had not actually learned tools for expressing my emotions in a healthy way, even as an adult. And so one of the things they had me do at some point was to literally physically somatically process emotions in my body by like trying to yell and have a tantrum.

And I did not have context or skills for that. It felt so unsafe that like the first time they were like, okay, just scream. I was like, ah. Like it wouldn't even come out. And so that's something I've been aware of with my kids is like, I wanna be present for their emotional experience, not obviously like pour fuel on that fire and also not send the message to them that their emotions are bad or scary or unsafe. And I feel like this is a delicate balance in parenting. So it, especially when a child's having those really big feelings, how can we show up as parents in a way that holds space for them that hopefully it doesn't trigger our own emotions. And also that doesn't like kind of give the message to them like, your emotions aren't okay.

Devon: Yes. This is such a great question and I love how you pointed out that, you know, in your experience, calm down, like hasn't really ever worked and quite frankly, like. Every adult out here listening right now, like how do you react if someone tells you to calm down like your parenting partner or maybe your parent or an in-law?

Who knows? But I know it doesn't usually go very well for me, right? Because it doesn't feel good when someone's trying to control your emotions. And sometimes we accidentally try to control our kids' emotions because we are uncomfortable with the full spectrum of emotions, right? And so we are uncomfortable with what we might label as like the negative emotions and try to like push them away.

And we like really wanna hold close what we might label as the positive emotions. But really emotions are just feelings and emotions just are, and the full spectrum is so

important and healthy. And your child's tantrum is truly an emotional release. Or as my friend Patty Withler says, an emotional poop.

They're just getting out all the stuff that like doesn't, that they don't need anymore. They're releasing it. And then that is what allows children to come back to their emotional equilibrium. So if we punish a child for feeling upset and not having control over their feelings and emotions, it will absolutely sound, send the message that I can't handle your emotions or certain emotions are not good or bad, or same if we distract a child with a screen every time they start to get upset. Now we're like teaching their brain, okay, when I get upset, I need to go like numb out this way to a screen. And so we just want to take a look at, okay, what kind of message are we sending around feelings and emotions and start practicing keeping all of accepting the full spectrum of feelings and emotions.

So how might you do this in practice? So this might look like just whenever your child is having a hard time creating that safety, that physical safety, and then just staying nearby. Taking deep breaths, grounding yourself. Less is often more during a tantrum. Allowing your child to get those feelings and emotions out while still upholding the limit is what is so important here.

And they're actually like, less is more when it comes to like what we're doing. It's really more about us and grounding ourselves and staying calm. Another thing that we sometimes actually do is just tell our kids to stop crying. And either we say, stop crying because we feel like what they're crying about isn't a big deal.

Or we're trying to get them to stop crying because we want them to feel better. But what we can do instead is validate our child's experience, feelings and emotions and say, that's so upsetting or that's so disappointing depending on whatever happened. So now we're accepting what's happening. We're accepting the feelings and emotions and just remember, just because you're accepting feelings and emotions does not mean that you're condoning behavior.

Those are two separate things. You can set limits on unacceptable, unsafe behavior while still accepting your child's feelings, emotions, and experience. And I think that's one of the most important things to remember.

Katie: Absolutely. I think that distinction alone, like that's like, to me, a key takeaway from this whole podcast is like those two things are simultaneously possible. Like we can fully hold space for what they're feeling without making their emotions and their feelings bad and still not let them have no boundaries.

And in fact, I would guess, especially with toddlers having safe boundaries that are within like the age appropriate space and that are lovingly held are actually a safety cue for them.

And holding boundaries is not in any way, not loving. It's also the way we communicate with our presence and like you said, with our presence and our words. And it seems like that is one thing, like you said, telling a child to calm down or an adult, there's memes galore about that of like, you know, husbands telling wives to calm down and how well that works too. That never works. However, the times that I've been able to communicate with the little ones, either through words or even just through my energy that I see you, I hear you, I love you and I love all of you, even when you're upset and still can hold the boundaries. And that does not mean you can hit your sister.

But those things are simultaneously possible and it seems like that actually does go a long way toward helping them calm down when they just feel like someone saw them and heard them and that they're a little bit understood. It helps them to maybe like feel the full intensity of that emotion as many of us get to learn in therapy as adults to actually feel it rather than distract or repress. And that, then it can pass through. Because certainly there's quotes abound of like, what we resist, persist, and if we fight something, it often gets bigger. And so like, I feel like that's a beautiful way to navigate that in a way that models at a very young age, like you said, your emotions are okay, your feelings are okay, and we're still responsible for our actions, even when we're having big feelings.

Devon: Absolutely. This is why in my new book, *Transforming Toddlerhood*, I talk a lot about the recipe for effective healthy discipline. And this applies, you know, whether you have little kids, you have a 2-year-old or you have a 12-year-old. But when we can align discipline with a child's development, things are going to go so much further.

And so part of this recipe, the first part is creating connection and there's ways of make, a, create physical and emotional connection. And what you're saying is so true and so important that when we create connection, this helps a child feel seen and heard. And oftentimes that connection is like the balm that can soothe feelings and big emotions and can actually quell a lot of behaviors because a lot of behaviors, especially the younger child, is, it is just a child asking, Hey, do you see me?

Do you hear me? Am I important? Am I loved? They just wanna know these things because a lot of the behaviors are about getting their needs met. And so then the second part of the recipe is setting limits and following through. And then the third part is teaching skills. So we teach children other ways to communicate their feelings, emotions, wants and needs, and work on increasing those skills, especially in the calm moments.

And then that will start to truly transform the behavior instead of just punishing behaviors that we see on the surface. And so I love what you said about helping children feel seen and heard because it's really foundational and extremely important.

Katie: And as we talked about a little bit in the beginning too, I feel like. Parenting does put us face to face with so many parts of our childhood all over again. And that there can be a big aspect, especially if we're not aware of it, in inadvertently passing on how we were parented to our kids. And it, in my experience, it actually requires a lot of, to your point, awareness and intentionality to like pay attention to those things and to learn new patterns.

But, and it seems very possible as well. But as an example from my own life because I think a lot about this, how do I avoid passing on negative generational patterns and still like realize there were beautiful strengths my parents had as well and bring those beautiful things into family culture. But one that I internalized in childhood was, if I had big feelings, I was often, especially if I yelled, I was often put in my room and isolated. And so I have even seen that show up as an adult. Like if I am upset about something, I will often self isolate. So I've tried to pay attention to that and not like ever punish my kids for their feelings.

Like, never be like, oh, your emotions are too much. Go in your room till you're ready to be quiet. If anything, I do, still do the opposite where I'm like, I'm gonna take some space. I'm gonna go breathe in my room for a while and then I would love to come back and talk to you. But I notice that's a pattern I have from my own childhood is if I feel big emotions, I still sometimes run away.

So how can we avoid passing on generational patterns and or how do we even become aware of those? Because I feel like when they're programmed so young, sometimes they're even hard to notice because they're so much a part of our frame of reference for life.

Devon: Yes, absolutely. And I love this example that you gave about, you know, how you might go take some breaths and ground yourself and then come back. And this is what's so beautiful, when we disrupt the stress response, we reduce that sense of urgency. So honestly, it doesn't matter as long as everyone is safe.

It doesn't matter if you respond to your child in five seconds, five minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, it actually doesn't matter as long as you've established that physical safety you can take as long as you need to establish the emotional safety and then go address the behaviors and what happens. So I love that you gave that example.

And so one way that we can create awareness is by, first of all, journaling. Journaling at the end of the day. I know that it's hard to create time for that, but even if you can just put a couple of notes in your phone about like how things went, things that went well, things that you wish would've gone differently, and then even writing out a little redo of how you would like to respond in the future.

This is how we start to create awareness and then create new habits. Because what's so beautiful is that you might have the awareness, like I said, like maybe five hours later, but

then you'll start having the awareness like 50 minutes later and then five minutes after you yelled, and then you start, you're in the middle of yelling, and then you're like, oh my gosh, I'm yelling.

And then you stop and you say, whoa, wait a minute. I'm yelling. That's not what I meant to do. Let me try again. And then you'll start to have the awareness of oh, I feel like I'm gonna yell. Let me take a moment to get grounded. And then go address what's happening. So journaling, meditation can be really supportive even if you only meditate five minutes a day.

It's shown to, even in research studies, shown to help us rewire our brain and support our nervous system. And so this can be really, really helpful and supportive. And then I think the other thing is just repairing the relationship. So the more that you repair the relationship and you're willing to be vulnerable, you're willing to be that human being parent instead of that you know, perfect parent and then feeling like you failed, then chastising yourself, and then feeling like too embarrassed to be vulnerable.

Because that's kind of like how that pattern can go. Repairing the relationship by taking ownership of your side of the street by saying something like, wow, I felt so frustrated and I lost control of my actions. And I yelled. And then saying something to your child like, Hey, how was that for you? So assessing the impact and then validating whatever your child says.

Now, if you have a 1 or 2-year-old, they might not have much to say, and that's okay, but if you have a three, 4-year-old or older, they might say something like, I didn't like it, that I was mad, you know? And so you can validate their experience. Then you can apologize. And, you know, say you're sorry and then do the redo.

Next time I feel this way, or next time we're in this situation, I want to, and then say what you're gonna do differently and then practice it right there, right there in that moment. Because the more that we practice, whether it's in that moment with our child, to the bathroom mirror, writing it out in journaling, that's still considered practicing, right?

When you write out how you would respond differently. The more that you are willing to practice, then the easier it's going to become to disrupt these generational cycles and have things go differently. But that's the work, right? It requires the willingness to self-reflect, the willingness to hold space for your own feelings and emotions and all the things.

And really, having compassion, right? Having compassion for yourself and for your child. That's really the foundation that allows us to do this work, that's what I firmly believe.

Katie: I love that. And I'll also say from my experience, I know there's often a lot of parallels drawn between like the toddler years and the terrible twos and then like the teen years and

the terrible teens. And I will say like having done this even completely very imperfectly with my toddlers and trying my best to make some of these habits when they're little I've noticed that this so far, the teenage years actually have been phenomenal.

In fact, actually I love the teenage years because I feel like when we build this foundation where they feel seen and heard and that there's good connection and communication, as we hand off boundaries to them as they get older and they're, they have more agency, it seems to diffuse a lot of the normal tension that can come with the teenage years, at least in my experience.

And I love that you're like really giving us a framework from the earliest ages on helping both in ourselves and in our family cultures and with our kids to build a beautiful foundation where they are learning these skills through modeling, where they feel like they have a safe place to express their feelings and their learning boundaries at the same time. And I know there's so much more in the book than we get to cover here, so I wanna make sure we talk a little bit about the book. I'll link to it of course in the show notes as well. But I love this as a resource. So what is your new book and where can people find it?

Devon: Yes. So my new book is *Transforming Toddlerhood* and it is really a groundbreaking book. It took me a while to write this book because I wanted to write a book that was going to make a difference for parents. So it is actually a quick reference guide. Think of it as like the what to expect for parenting kids ages one to five, but also what is so amazing about it, not only is it 45 mini chapters that will answer all of your questions, that, of all the challenges you might face parenting little ones, I've divided into five sections that focus on the toddler parent, the toddler explain, the social toddler, the emotional toddler, and the physical toddler.

So I have a whole section dedicated to the toddler parent and learning your role, how to work with your triggers, how to create that safety, that emotional safety as a parent, what to do when your parenting partner is not on the same page, because those are the foundational things and challenges that we have the opportunity to work on and work through so we're able to show up the way that we want to. And so the way that we envision as parents. And so we can find this book everywhere that books are sold. On, also on Amazon, or you can go to transformingtoddlerhood.com/book.

Katie: Amazing. Well, I'll make sure that it's linked in the show notes. And having gotten to preview that in preparation for this episode, I will say I highly recommend it. I love that this is a resource that you have made available. I wish it was available when all of my older kids were toddlers. But I'll make sure all the links are there as well as your Instagram.

You post a lot of great content there as well. So all of that will be in the show notes. But thank you so much for your time. I love this topic. I love the work that you do and I'm so grateful to you for being here.

Devon: Thank you so much for having me.

Katie: And thank you for listening and I hope you will join me again on the next episode of the Wellness Mama Podcast.