

**LAURA MARKHAM, PhD**  
***Peaceful Parents, Happy Kids***

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*Laura Markham is a New York-based author, clinical psychologist and nationally recognized parent educator. Her parenting advice frequently appears in national media and on a website she co-founded, [AhaParenting.com](http://AhaParenting.com), which has more than 100,000 subscribers in the United States and Canada. In January 2018, Dr. Markham presented three keynote lectures for Common Ground on why building stronger relationships with children is the key to more cooperation, less drama and a more peaceful home. She is the author of two books on the topic, “Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids: How to Stop Yelling and Start Connecting” and “Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings: How to Stop the Fighting and Raise Friends for Life”. Her website, [AhaParenting.com](http://AhaParenting.com), is a comprehensive, well-organized resource offering a multitude of articles, videos and podcasts dealing with all ages and stages of parenting. Advice is grouped into developmental categories, ranging from preschool, elementary and tweens to early teens and teenage. In addition, the site offers online courses, weekly coaching emails and other parenting resources. Following are highlights from Dr. Markham's talks, which draw on more than 20 years of clinical practice and her first-hand experience as the mother of two grown children.*

Dr. Markham presented a compassionate alternative to “old school” styles of parenting that relied on bribes, threats and harsh punishment to control children. She passionately advocated for a more evolved, 21st century approach that she calls “peaceful parenting,” a method focused on emotional regulation, gentle guidance and positive discipline.

The award-winning psychologist presented three guiding tenets to creating the kind of peaceful home that encourages children to grow into considerate, responsible and competent adults:

- **First, regulate your own emotions:** Dr. Markham says if parents want children to regulate their behavior they must first learn to regulate their own to be a good mentor. This requires a willingness to reflect upon their own upbringing, response patterns and emotional triggers.
- **Connect with your child:** The secret of happy parenting is building a warm, trusting relationship with your child. Without that connection, parents lose influence (“My kids just won’t listen...”) and home life becomes increasingly negative and exhausting.
- **Focus on coaching, not controlling:** The goal of “peaceful parenting” is to treat children in a way that makes them *want* to cooperate. Dr. Markham says negative methods - trying to scare children into compliance and/or break their will through inflexible edicts, harsh punishment and emotional outbursts - are counterproductive. She says they can undermine children’s ability to self-regulate and problem-solve, ingraining the very misbehaviors they are trying to eliminate.

Dr. Markham shared several anecdotes from her own experiences as a mother, including examples of speaking insensitively or overreacting to a situation. No parent is perfect, she emphasized, but by routinely practising self-care and mindful self-regulation, we can greatly improve our effectiveness as parents at each stage of child development.

## **Emotion Coaching**

Dr. Markham says it is natural for children and teens to have trouble controlling their feelings, pointing to the fact that the brain's prefrontal cortex regulating reasoning and emotion does not fully develop until about age 25. She reviewed several techniques (detailed in greater length on her website and in her most recent books) on how to become an effective coach. For example, she says the moment children shows signs of distress, parents should hit the "pause button." Then:

- Stop, drop your agenda and take a deep breath.
- Remember the goal is to calm the storm for your child, not escalate it.
- Don't take your child's emotions personally. This isn't about you. This is about her confused feelings and her developing brain.

## **To Punish or Not to Punish?**

Loving guidance, not autocratic punishment, is the key to raising a positive, self-disciplined child, says Dr. Markham. She cites studies that show negative punishment influences children to become chronic liars, less resilient and more disruptive.

Dr. Markham warns that parents must set healthy boundaries for children, but that family rules should be communicated and enforced with empathy and respect. Parents need to acknowledge the child's perspective and share the reasoning behind their own boundaries. "When kids feel heard, they are more likely to accept our rules."

Although Dr. Markham believes time-outs are "infinitely better than hitting your child," she says the punishment and humiliation they impose is harmful. She recommends "time-ins" for children. Instead of isolating a child, the parent calmly explains why the behavior is unacceptable and then stays close by in a quiet place until the child is ready to listen and brainstorm solutions.

The primary goal for parents is to listen deeply to what their child is saying, Dr. Markham says, without interrupting or rushing to judgment. When parents remain calm in difficult situations, she explains, children learn that feelings aren't dangerous. They realize that even the most intense emotions diminish over time. As parents help children grow more comfortable with the fleeting nature of emotions, Dr. Markham says, they gradually learn to self-regulate and become more open to positive coaching.

## **Parenting Teens**

Dr. Markham acknowledges that regulating teen behavior can be exceptionally tricky. "What we usually think of as discipline backfires with teens. If you come down with a sledge hammer, you can count on open rebellion." She details several "peaceful parenting" methods to regulate teen behavior on her website. These suggestions can be found at: <http://www.ahaparenting.com/ages-stages/teenagers>

## **Most Inspiring Takeaway**

Perhaps the most inspiring takeaway from Dr. Markham's presentation is that no child-rearing technique is more important than a parent's ability to make a child feel validated and loved. Maintaining that strong bond, she says, is the best strategy for keeping our children safe, engaged and happy.