

Where You Are

S4 Episode 5 — Tantrums, Outbursts, and Negotiations: Parenting Kids With Challenging Behaviours

TRANSCRIPT:

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Jeremy: No one in the history of the world has ever calmed down when being asked to calm down. And so why would you expect your child to do that? They need more than that. And so that's when the detective thinking comes in and thinking, "Okay, I got to go deeper here. I can't just say 'calm down' and then expect that it goes away in three seconds." So what's underneath? What's underlying this? And just getting curious and getting to know your kids is a big part of that.

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Bryn Askwith: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Bryn Askwith. Children can behave in challenging ways at all different stages of life. As a parent with two kids myself, many examples come to mind, from big feelings and tantrums, to angry outbursts and constant negotiations when kids are looking to do things their way. I know that these things can be really frustrating and overwhelming at times, and lots of parents with kids under the age of 12 might be looking for ways to support their child through these challenging behaviors. And so here to co-host this episode about managing challenging behaviors in kids is Char Black, fellow parent, colleague, friend and former Where You Are co-host. Char, what a perfect episode for you to be joining me on.

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Char Black: Thanks, Bryn. Yes, this is really perfect because there's meltdowns every day in my house, from my kids and from myself. So I think I'll learn a lot in this episode. Today in Where You Are, we'll be talking about why challenging behaviors can occur in children, strategies and tools parents and caregivers can use before big behaviors show up, as well as supporting your kids in these moments when things get really escalated, and how these strategies can add to your parenting approaches and support you to continue building a positive relationship with your child. So I'm really excited for this conversation. Let's get into it.

On today's episode, we have Dr. Janet Mah, a registered psychologist from BC Children's Hospital Child and Youth Mental Health. Welcome to the podcast, Dr. Mah.

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Dr. Janet Mah: Thank you. Happy to be here.

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Char Black: Dr. Mah, you work with a lot of families on parenting challenging behaviors in children, including tantrums, not listening to instructions, disruptive behaviors and angry outbursts. Can you start us off by explaining and helping us understand why it is that kids have challenging behaviors?

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Dr. Janet Mah: Yes. I think kids act out when they lack the underlying skills that's necessary to do what's expected. So it's quite helpful to actually reframe your mindset from seeing challenging behaviors in children to being like them purposefully being defiant or manipulative, to rather viewing them as lacking the skills that's needed to follow through. So when we do this, then parents are able to be more proactive in supporting their kids ahead of time as opposed to reacting perhaps more negatively or harshly than they intended.

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Bryn Askwith: I also wanted to bring into the conversation Jeremy, who is a parent of two amazing kids under the age of seven, and like many other parents out there, very familiar with these issues. Jeremy, welcome to the podcast.

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Jeremy: Hi, pleasure to be here.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks. Jeremy, can you tell us a little bit about your family and some of the challenging behaviors that have come up with your kids and when you first noticed them?

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Jeremy: Yeah, definitely. So two children, a boy of six, a girl of three, and really the main focus has been the boy at the moment. So what we noticed with James was around about the summer of 2021, he went through a couple of key transitions, so going from the preschool daycare that we had him into, into kindergarten, and then at the same time going from that preschool daycare into a before and after program. And just the transition was very, very challenging. Around about the same time, his sister kind of started walking and talking, and so that changed things in the family a little bit. When you've got another little sibling there, you can sometimes see a little bit of behavior modification.

And then I think in the fall of the same year, we noticed really strong reactions to transitions, very sensitive to things like getting shots was incredibly difficult, haircuts, toenail clipping. There was also some issues around joining activities. So it would take a long time to get James involved in activities, and then quite often he would want to withdraw from them and that type of thing. And then just overall, the general at-home behavior, it seemed to be deteriorating, and it was hard to put our finger on something. And I like the way that Dr. Mah refers to it as challenging behavior because that's really kind of all you see is this jumble of things that could be a whole number of different things. But I didn't really have the skills to distinguish or decipher and it just came across as very challenging.

So that was really it. And then I think the final thing that led us to seeking help was a kindergarten teacher who James had really connected well with said, "Look, things are going great. He's really engaged, loves being at school, very comfortable, but struggles with transitions, can be a little sensitive too if he's trying to do something and another kid comes along and maybe knocks something over, it'll trigger him to have a big reaction." And so we said, "Well, we are seeing the same big reactions at home. What do we need to do to try and handle these big reactions better?" In our case, I don't think it's about something being wrong, it's about just realizing that you have to give children, children the skills, and us as parents need the skills. So we're both building these skills to have better and better relationships in the home.

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Bryn Askwith: Yes, we learn so much from our kids, they learn so much from us, and they really give us lots of opportunities and chances to kind of hone these skills and work through these things together.

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Char Black: Dr. Mah, we've heard you speak at events in the past about supporting kids with challenging behaviors. When you do talk to parents about this topic, where do you start?

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Dr. Janet Mah: I like to use a pyramid model to organize the range of parenting strategies, and the pyramid consists of four layers, and the foundational layer is key in fostering a positive relationship with your child, which really needs to be established first and foremost and to be done the most often. So it's really important at this level to fill up your kids' emotional tank, and the best way to do that is to give them lots of positive attention. And two very practical strategies to do that would be one, catch your child being good, so giving that immediate and descriptive praise of what you like them doing, and then the second practical strategy in this level is child directed play in which we let the child play and lead the play. And it doesn't mean that we're just passively observing them playing, either, we're actively engaged as parents by following along, narrating what you see in their play, and praising their creativity and their ideas in the play.

Now the second stage of the pyramid level are things that you can do in the environment and with your instructions that can help prevent the difficult behaviors from occurring in the first place, things like visual aids when you list morning or bedtime routines as a schedule, or have visual timers, like an hourglass or a visual countdown app to show how much time is remaining for transitions. And then another practical strategy is how you give effective instructions so that your child is more likely to actually follow through with what you're asking. So try to break things down one step at a time and use positive and direct phrasing. So instead of saying, "Can you stop shouting?" Because then they could just say, "No," reframe it to say, "Use your indoor voice." And then you could give appropriate choices like, "Let's get in the car. Do you want a tiptoe or walk backwards on the way there?" So bringing in a lot of play and humor and silliness can also help motivate kids to get things started.

The third layer of the pyramid really involves teaching those underlying skills deficits to help kids cope. So whether it's communication skills or social skills or a big emphasis that I focus on would be emotion regulation skills, which I think a lot of kids and adults could benefit from. So one thing would be to acknowledge that it's actually okay to have big feelings. So validating your child's big emotions by labeling what it is and giving three points to show how much you understand. So, " I see you're angry because you can't have what you want, because I'm telling you that it's not the right time and it's totally frustrating when you don't have control." And then finally, at the very tip of the pyramid are more specific targeted approaches that are used way less frequently, but it's for specific purposes to increase the behaviors you want to see more of and then decrease the things you want to see less of. So for instance, setting up an effective incentive system to motivate a child to do something that's new or effortful can help to establish some good routines and habits.

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Char Black: Awesome. Thank you Dr. Mah. You covered a lot in that pyramid, and what I got out of it was really around the bottom layer around building the positive relationships. I as a parent, I'm always trying to not water the weeds. I'm trying to really pay attention to the good stuff and not the bad stuff, but that's an active thing I'm always trying to learn. So thanks for going through that pyramid around building positive relationships, creating those supportive environments, and doing the skills teaching and training, as well as those targeted behavior plans.

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Bryn Askwith: You are listening to Where You Are. I'm Bryn Askwith. Looking to learn about more strategies for supporting your child with challenging behaviors? Head to our resource library on our website, keltymentalhealth.ca/ resources and search challenging behaviors. You'll find websites, toolkits, books, and provincial programs for parents and caregivers on this very topic.

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Char Black: Jeremy, you've just heard a little bit about what Dr. Mah mentioned with some of these parenting strategies and tools to help when kids have difficult behaviors. Can you share an example that you used and why it was helpful?

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Jeremy: Yeah, I think in terms of the child led play, that was probably the biggest revelation for me because what I had been doing a lot with James was fairly structured. So he had shown an interest early on, likes playing cards. So he knows six or seven different card games that we cycled through, took to Monopoly at an early age, before he could even read what was on the card,. He just had a sense of what to do in the game. And so we would have a lot of more kind of structured play where there were rules and there's an end point, there's an objective. And so what I've been able to do a little bit more is kind of pull back and let him show me how he wants to play and kind of observe and commentate, and those things that Dr. Mah had mentioned. So that's been a success.

I think the praising and ignoring, so praising the right things and ignoring what you don't want to see, that has been effective. I think with James in particular, because he's got a real need to be precise and he has a strong sense of logic and cause and effect, and those things. So when I have to tell him why something can't happen or why it can't happen now, the more specific I get, the more it tends to resonate with them. But I have to be prepared to do that. So I quite often can't just come up with it on the go. I need to think about these things in advance. So when we're thinking about how to transition him from one thing to the other or to try and convince him to do something that we know he's going to be reluctant to do, I have to kind of get prepared and be ready to explain and lay it out for him in a way that he's going to like to hear. Just getting prepared for that has been a help. And then also just going back to the basics and thinking, "Is he getting enough sleep?" He does sleep well, but sometimes when he comes home from school, I forget how hungry he's going to be. And so just taking care of basics like let's get a snack inside him before we ask him to write out his poem for homework or to read something. So just kind of going back to basics and remembering that he has fundamental, in the moment needs as well has been a real help.

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Bryn Askwith: Dr. Mah, you've walked us through some great approaches already and given us some great examples for parents and caregivers to guide their kids' behaviors, but I'm sure there's also parents listening who are thinking, " But at times, as a parent, I need to set some limits and consequences," whether it's a safety issue or just in general. I think that can be a part of parenting. So any tips or strategies you can offer to listeners in those situations?

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Dr. Janet Mah: Yes, definitely. It is a big component of just for kids to understand that the world doesn't revolve around them and that you can't have everything that you want all the time. And so in order to know how best to respond, you really need to figure out though what's driving the behavior. So for instance, if a child is not eating dinner and constantly leaving the table, well, there could be maybe three or four driving functions to that. For instance, maybe they need some sensory motor stimulation. So if that's the case, then maybe providing an opportunity for movement while they're having their meal at the same time.

But that will be a very different response if the child is leaving the table in order to get attention, in which case then you might want to consider praising him and giving him attention for times where they are at the table or they've even engaged in anything related to the meal or the food, and then ignoring the misbehavior. Or perhaps if the child is doing these things in order to avoid things that they don't want to do, like they don't want to eat that specific meal, then maybe break it down into smaller bites because that's easier to accomplish than the whole plate. And then pairing each bite with a little mini incentive to kind of kickstart that motivation. And then finally, if they're doing challenging behaviors in order to get something else that's more appealing that they want, then perhaps use the first then rule. So first you have to do this preferred task, and then you can have the thing that you much rather do instead.

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Bryn Askwith: Those are great tips. Jeremy, does any of that resonate for you?

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Jeremy: Yeah. Yeah, an awful lot of it does. We've got a pretty good sense now of what our son wants to do, and obviously we know what we need him to do, and sometimes just finding the right sequence of those things, and then of course, following through on it. So if we're going to use a reward, then we need to be prepared to give the reward. A lot of what I heard there has really, really worked for us. I think it probably falls under the category of treating anyone with respect, and the same goes for your child. I mean, one of the doctors that I spoke to previously said, "No one in the history of the world has ever calmed down when being asked to calm down." And so why would you expect your child to do that? And so when I heard that, I kind of thought, "That's a good point." Like I say, "Calm down a lot." It's kind of my default, but they need more than that. That's not working and at the point where you are saying, "Calm down," it's just not getting through. And so that's when the detective thinking comes in and thinking, "Okay, I got to go deeper here. I can't just say 'calm down' and then expect that it goes away in three seconds." So what's underneath? What's underlying this? And just getting curious and getting to know your kids is a big part of that.

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Char Black: I'm definitely the calm down parent as well, which has never been effective. There's a difference between knowing what you're supposed to be doing as a parent and actually executing on it. So Jeremy, I think we can agree that while addressing challenging behaviors with our kids is one part of parenting, there's lots of other great moments in there. Can you tell us a little bit more about your child's strengths and one thing about their behavior that you're proud of?

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Jeremy: Oh, lots. Yeah. I mean, he's very quick to learn, very curious, sleeps well, eats well, energetic, competitive, verbal, good with numbers, reads well. And so it kind of goes back to what I mentioned before where when I ask him not to do something, I'm going to have to go in there with some logic as well. There's going to have to be a substantial reason behind it. I can't just say, "Don't do it." He's very calm and happy in public. We don't have the public meltdowns that you see and hear about.

A lot of the challenging behavior for us comes at home where we know that he's comfortable. And it seems like sometimes you get him home from school, and it's just there's been this buildup, this buildup of something that just explodes in the first 20, 25 minutes. And so that truly... a lot of why we thought that we needed to get help in the first place was just home was a bit of a battleground for a while. But no, I mean very, very happy with the way that he interacts with other children, adults that he's familiar with. But yeah, no, lots of great stuff happening as well that we're very grateful for.

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Char Black: Great. I love how you were talking about the home being a safe space and just interpreting it that way rather than their waiting all day to be rude at home or explode at home. So I really love that, and I love how he needs a very thorough explanation. He's going to get smarter and smarter. He's only six, so he's going to keep asking lots of questions, so that's great. Dr. Mah, are there any resources about parenting challenging behaviors that you can share with our parents and caregivers listening today?

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Dr. Janet Mah: Definitely. If you want to find out more and read more details to consolidate everything, Keltly Mental Health has an excellent set of resources, and one of which is a webpage that I helped to inform, which is titled, My Child Has Outbursts, Anger and Aggression, What Do I Do? So if you look that up, it details a lot of key things and more that we haven't discussed today. Also, if you are living in the province of BC, then the Confident Parents Thriving Kids is a telephone-based coaching service that's provided free by the province. It does require a physician referral, but it is available to help parents do a deeper dive into these types of strategies for kids with mild to moderate behavioral difficulties from ages three to 12.

And then there is an online program called Rolling With ADHD, and that has a set of similar strategies, which definitely can actually apply to all kids, whether they have ADHD or not. So that one is just self-registration, so it is worthwhile to take a look at, even if you want to get some ideas, whether your kid has ADHD or not. And then for those of you who are really interested in reading books and soaking up the knowledge that way, the two favorite parenting books that I like is called The Incredible Years by Carolyn Webster-Stratton, maybe for kids under the age of eight, and then for a wider range of kids age ranges, then The Whole-Brain Child by Daniel Siegel is a good one as well.

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Char Black: That really helps me as a parent as well. And Jeremy, now that you've had a bit of a chance to use a few of these approaches with James, can you tell us a little bit about how this has impacted how you show up as a parent in these moments with challenging behaviors?

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Jeremy: Yeah, I think just being far more understanding of what might be driving some of the behaviors that we see. I think had a lot of reassurance around children aren't trying to be badly behaved. It's a symptom of something else. And so trying to get to what that something else might be, like you really have to think about what's going on under the surface. So that that's been a great help.

Also the fact that because we hear from specialists like Dr. Mah, you must know that there are other parents that are going through exactly the same thing. So just having that reassurance that you're not the only one going through this, that there are other parents that have gone through situations where some things have worked, some things have not worked, and sometimes just talking to other parents and hearing what they're going through and what's worked and hasn't worked for them I think can also really help you recalibrate the fact that

you're not the only one facing this, this isn't some kind of failure. It's just part of an ongoing journey to try and give your child the best so that they can become everything they could possibly become.

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Char Black: Great. That was really well said, Jeremy. Thank you. And I agree, everything you said throughout this podcast, everything you said. Personally, I was like, "Yes, this happens to me too." So I agree with that one for sure.

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Jeremy: Yeah. And I think if you're reluctant to talk to other people, you'll never get to hear... There'll be no reciprocation. So what I've found is that... because a lot of my friends that we have, I'm an older dad, so a lot of my friends have teenagers, so they're maybe like 10 years ahead of where I am, and so just saying, "Hey, this is what we're going through," has led to some really interesting conversations where someone can reflect on, "Oh, well, when we were going through that situation, this is what we saw and this is what worked for us." And so I think if you choose not to be vulnerable and engage in those conversations, I think you're going to miss out on a lot. And if you choose to be vulnerable and say, "We've had some challenges," then there's just a goldmine of information out there that can help you.

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Char Black: Great, and that's why we're so appreciative of you sharing your story, Jeremy, today to all the parents and caregivers listening to our podcast. Thank you.

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Bryn Askwith: Winding down our time together today, on our podcast, we always ask everybody if they have any words of wisdom that they'd like to offer or share with our listeners. So maybe Dr. Mah, we can start with you and then Jeremy, if you have anything you'd like to add as well, that would be great.

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Dr. Janet Mah: I just want to also say that there's recognition that each tool has a specific purpose, and a specific way of using it well. So just as you can't use a hammer to solve every problem in construction or renovation, you can't also use the same parenting techniques for every situation. So knowing how to use each parenting tool properly and for what situation is useful, and then to try to polish it up and update it over time so that it stays relevant will be useful.

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Bryn Askwith: And Jeremy, final thoughts or words of wisdom?

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Jeremy: I have to remind myself that our long-term trend is a really positive one, and so if we have one bad evening or even a bad week or even a bad couple of weeks, we've just gone

through that transition from Christmas holidays and then going back to school, and so we've just been through a bit of a rough patch, but I have to remind myself that yeah, when you focus in on the last couple of weeks, then it looks like we may be heading in the wrong direction, but if you take a wide angle view and say, "Well, where have we come from? What stages have we gone through and where are we going?" The overall trajectory is really positive. And so just I guess don't let one bad day or bad week distract you from the trend, and the trend is a really positive one. So yeah, I remind myself of that, remind my wife of that, and when you pull out a little bit and see the wider focus, things are trending positively.

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Bryn Askwith: That's a fantastic takeaway. Thank you all very much.

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Char Black: Thanks, Dr. Mah and Jeremy.

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Jeremy: Thank you very much.

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Dr. Janet Mah: Thank you so much. It was great to share these insights together.

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Char Black: Bryn, it's been really great co-hosting with you on this episode. Thanks to our Where You Are listeners as well. Glad you tuned in with us today.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks, Char. I always love co-hosting with you, total highlight for me. This episode of Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Emily Morantz with Audio Engineering by Sam Seguin. Audio Production by JAR Audio. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a rating wherever you might be listening now.

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