Spoil Your Baby Ep 46 - Discipline and Development: The Zero to Three Guide feat Dr Vanessa Lapointe Transcript

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Introduction and podcast welcome

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The concept of the boundary then is a meaningless concept because we are with our babies as a necessary condition that nature bestowed upon us. They're meant to be deeply, deeply dependent on us, and so I suppose in a way, you know, that if you think about the idea that we're a social species and we live hopefully harmoniously amongst each other with this concept of that there's social norms.

Hello, everybody. Welcome to Spoil Your Baby podcast. I'm so excited to be here today with Dr. Vanessa LaPointe. She's a former psychologist and now a parenting educator and a mother.

And her and I were lucky enough to spend time together about a year ago. in Romania on a wonderful trip. And we're reunited today. So thank you so much for being here.

Feels so good. It really does. Today, we are going to talk about something that I think may be a unique conversation. for a lot of parents. It's a place where there's like a and touch on why kind of the traditional idea of discipline doesn't really fit with how babies' brains grow and how baby's develop.

Why discipline can create anxiety

So why don't we start with you? What brought you to this work and the world of Discipline? You know, I was practicing as a psychologist and also had young children.

And I had been trained in what I will define as a very kind of behaviorist approach. You don't like what you're seeing, you squash it. And the method that will be deemed successful is whatever one ends up plugging the behavior to stop, right?

So there wasn't a lot of consideration for what is happening behind the behaviour, what's happening in the internal world. And then I started to notice that the referrals coming into our clinic across all the clinicians, a of those referrals are anxiety-based, and a child presenting with kind of challenging behaviors.

And when we would go through those intakes and look at sort of what was happening for families, it seems like the discipline was actually causing the anxiety.

So I started to do a deep dive and I studied a bit with Gordon Neufeld and and like a bunch of different things to try and figure out like what's the mismatch here.

There's obviously something happening. And eventually what I came up with is that there is sort of a a downstream fallout from how we discipline our children.

And that fall out actually creates, you know, more disruption for them in life as the years take on than if we were to be able to approach things in a compassionate kind of way.

You know it's all part of a really interesting school of thought in terms of who children are and how they communicate and, how it is that we are meant to interact with that, so that they get to go and grow in the way that nature intended, not necessarily in way we think is the path.

Yeah, it's so, reminds me so much of the kind of the sort of, the same misinformation that tries to guide parents to not spoil their babies, right? They're like, don't hold them too much, that will spoil your baby.

But actually, if you don' hold, they're not nourished, and then they end up with the effects that you think you're avoiding. And it sounds so similar with a discipline, where it's like people are kind brought up in a world where if do sort harsh discipline and punishments, your sort of promise that everything will turn out, but actually then you're starting to see some of the anxiety and some the behavior that you are trying to avoid.

Absolutely. Absolutely, and I think it's all part of the same thing. Yes. You know, like, the the logic that would fuel this idea that, you know babies need to self-soothe and, all of that kind of nonsense.

Developmental behavior and toddler communication

The same logic, that fuels that is the, same, logic applied to why we should punish children and why, we, should, make sure that they've, really understood who's in charge and, you know, all of that kind of stuff.

It's all the same school of thought. Completely, yeah. Mostly that behaviorist thought, I always tell parents like, was zero to three, so much of the quote, air quotes, bad behavior are a stress response in the baby, right?

So at least like what are the bad behaviors like that need to be disciplined or punished? They're like crying, hitting, running away, not listening, still biting, scratching, all that kind of stuff.

Yeah, tell us more about that. Well, I think about like, what does it mean to be Let's pick two as just a random age. And as a two-year-old, by definition, you're very much in process of developing and becoming.

So by a definition then, your brain is immature. You know you don't have impulse control, or you have the wiring necessary for self-regulation. That's still another 25 years or so in the making.

to go to the example of biting. When you're two years old, you are still orally focused. Like that's an interesting portal for you to explore your world.

And it would make good sense to me anyways, if you two and you were oraly focused and don't have the internal wiring for self-regulation and your in a moment of overwhelm or a moments of excitement that you would like grab the thing closest and just like, Like think you're, like, oh, it feels so good, right?

And then imagine that that's what you need. Like as a little two-year-old, we're not going to say that we just allow it to happen. But as the two year old, imagine, that, so your little nervous system is like oh we need to get hold of this right now.

And so does this beautiful thing for you, which is gives you an outlet to give a hold to this thing right and then you are made wrong for it. Can you imagine the like disorientation that would happen for a child?

Shame probably, right? It would be like, you know, I've always had hazel eyes. So imagine that I'm born into the world, this is who I am, and I get made wrong, the change that eye color, that's not okay.

That's largely what we do to kids when we make developmentally appropriate behaviors or any behavior for that matter, we make them wrong for being who it is that they are and then all bets are off.

Like that's when things start to get challenging. Completely. And babies are really asking us to fully accept them for who they. So that is a huge disconnect for them.

Then we have our parents who are pressured to have well behaved babies. And like, you know, that puts them in a place where they're like what? What's the answer?

What do I do? And the problem is, the answers is not what everybody thinks it should be. Like the answered isn't to

stop the behavior. The answer is to support the child.

And we do that by retreating to the environment around the childhood. So if you think about like the ABCs of behavior, that behaviorist approach is going to focus on the Cs.

So the A is the antecedent, the thing that comes before the behavior, The B is behavior. The C being the consequence or the things that come after the behaviors.

Behaviorists are focused on the C. A behavior occurs, I'm going to create some kind of backlash pressure so that it doesn't occur again by applying what we dress up and call a consequence, but really it's a punishment if we're going to be just clear about the terminology.

Whereas if you want to really nurture development, then the developmentalists, of which I would say I'm in that club, You focus on the antecedent. It's what came before.

And so, what's happening in the environment around the child, it's been a really overstimulating day. You've had six fights this week with your partner and your child though maybe not understanding the nature of that is bathed in energy of kinds of things that come before.

And we want to just take stock of how is the world around the child and the environment around a child, how was that meshing with who it is that they are and how it that is they're showing up in the worlds.

Is that a fit for them or not?

What boundaries mean for babies

And if it's not, then to understand that our role as the grown-ups is to make it work for the children, to not make the childhood work us and for us around them.

Absolutely. And, you know, with the behaviorist approach, we're also assuming that the child will have the brain ability to change a reactive moment, right, then as adults, we barely have the ability to change our reactions when we're completely dysregulated.

And so we think that a child is going to get dys-regulated, be in a reactive moment and be like, Oh, I had to have a time out last time. I thought it better change.

Like, if you want to make yourself crazy, do that. Yeah. So, let's give people an example, right? So let say it is the, my child gets upset and bites, for example.

Or hits or kicks or throws, goes on the ground and does a tantrum. The classic response would be to punish them, to… have some kind of consequence to try to stop that behavior coming up in the future.

We know that doesn't really make sense or work. What should parents be looking at? I know there's so much for them to learn, but the idea is that all behavior is just communication.

There's no such thing as misbehavior. And so our job, particularly for a young child, will want to be considering developmentally where it is that they are at and allow ourselves to meet them exactly there.

You want to put the bar where they can jump and have success with that, not where there going to be tripping over it constantly and feeling, you know, at the effect of that.

If you have a two-year-old that's biting, the appropriate response is to provide more supervision so that you can be available to whatever the need is, as it arises in the moment.

And of course, in a firm and kind Emphasis on kind way you can be communicating what the Boundary is or what?

The expectation is but do so in a way that does that you are not diluted into believing That just because you've communicated that that it's never going to happen again, of course.

It's gonna happen You're gonna have to probably say it a hundred or a thousand times like at minimum. Yeah, I And the road to hell for our littles is not paved with good intentions.

You know, our children can have beautiful intentions and just by virtue of the fact that they're still figuring it out and they are still going and growing and their perfection and all of that.

But by the virtue that it's all still in flux, they just aren't going to be able to hang on to their good intention and we can believe in the innocence of who they are, just as we should do for each other, and come alongside that rather than have to react and squash.

Yeah. So, really, they're having these big moments of stress, these feelings, this overwhelm, And they need our support in those moments. And some guidance, possibly, like once they've calmed down, but without those expectations the next time.

will be different. It's like they're learning over years, really. Exactly. Yeah. And we can lean into that as a powerful force, you know? Like, it's real.

Child development is real, I promise you. They develop. Our job is to make that path as unencumbered as possible. Yes. I have two questions competing in my head.

For… I'll ask the first one first. You mentioned boundaries, right? And having some, gentle, you know, kind boundaries. What are some, I see some like misunderstandings about boundaries and babies a lot.

Will you speak to us a little bit about that? Yeah, you know, I mean, it's an interesting word, given the connotation that it takes on. And when we think about babies and who babies are, they are us, like they're an extension of who it is that we are.

Like if I were to define boundaries, more generally speaking, boundaries are meant to keep self within, not to Keep somebody else out. And so if we think about like, what does that mean to a baby?

The concept of the boundary then is a meaningless concept because we are with our babies as a necessary condition that nature bestowed upon us, they're meant to be deeply, deeply dependent on us.

I suppose in a way, you know, that if you think about the idea that we're a social species and we live hopefully harmoniously amongst each other with this concept of that there's social norms, we don't walk down the street and bite random people or hit random or whatever.

We have social nuance about these sorts of things. reminder what I often think of like we just put little guardrails on the bridges that our children are walking across so that the our Children can feel safe.

You know, they can Feel like they're not going to fall off the bridge. And the guard rails are those little boundaries and how we're showing up and How we have, you know routines in place and And by routines, I mean like ways that we greet one another and ways, that, we say good night to each other, goodbye to, each, other or ways.

That we come to the table together ways you know, like, ways That, We be all of this is. like what I would talk about as being the way that we be bandraied with our youngsters.

So it's not this sort of more commonly held concept of a boundary, like I don't want that right now, so you're going to have to wait or da, da da. It's how do I hold myself within so that I can be fullest and most available to those who are counting on me.

It's not about being against other or keeping other out. And for our babies, I think we have to be careful about that

definition and how we construct it.

Yeah, that's such an important analysis for parents to know, because I there are so many messages out there about having boundaries, even with young babies.

Supporting emotions instead of punishing behavior

The ways that I see it, in the world are just acting to stress babies out even more and get more of that, you know, behavior that parents are uncomfortable with or think is bad, right?

Yes. Yeah. Completely. So this is wonderful. This is a really supportive approach to our babies, helping them learn slowly and gently, and also knowing that they also want to be pro-social in the end, right?

Like when we are offering those suggestions, like, oh, we'll use like gentle hands with our friends. When we're mad, can stomp our feet instead, or those little suggestions we can help them with that take a lot of time.

Also having that faith in them, that they don't do want to cooperate with a lot of the boundaries that you talked about. They want be part of a table at dinner, they want have manners and, you know, be kind to our friends and all these kinds of things.

And I don' know if people see babies like that always. Yeah, there's a real, like the historical lens on that is that like kids have been this nuisance and they're this, you know, thing that needs to be tamed and kind of controlled.

And when we can flip it, if we, we just really get that we revert to an understanding that they are inherently good. Yes. And they can have a hard time, just like all of us, right?

When a baby just, like, flips out and starts having a tantrum or screams or, you know, throws something off a table, I still see that reaction in the world where it's like…

bad, bad behavior, and the attention's on the parent, what are they gonna do? And we're still really not there yet with understanding our little ones.

Really not there at all. And, you know, there's still, it's so stunning to me. I don't know if you have this experience, but I feel like I'm stuck in this little bubble, aside from the, the interesting commentary that maybe flows on some of my social media posts.

I mean, I mostly talk to people like you, and I talk parents who come to me because they've maybe heard some things in the way that I talked about children and they want some support.

So I'm in this bubble of people who see things the ways that see I things. And so I am often, like it's stunning to be out in world that there are still, you know, did a new intake just earlier this week.

with a family who were really being encouraged by their pediatrician for their six-month-old baby to use Cry It Out. And I still can't understand how in 2025, we're still talking about that.

We're talking timeouts. you know, punishing children. I was in a school the other day and happened to be sort of working off of a classroom where I think the teacher probably either didn't know I in there or didn t realize that I had been there.

And I heard the irritation that laced the voice as the directives were delivered to the students. But this is how we think about children, and this the way we're conceptualizing our role in their upbringing.

And if we could, you know, really get back to the core of who they are, of we all are. Which is that we are in a sense and innocent and light and all things lovely and we can really lean into the goodness of that and then trust that nature will do with that exactly.

What is meant to be done? Absolutely. I could not agree more. It's amazing. it is still amazing and I have families as well who sort of are like, okay, great.

Like, I'll do it that way for zero to three, but like then like I'm going to start. When do I get to start really punishing and really going with this discipline?

So, will you speak to that a little bit as well for Lister? Yeah. The short answer is never. Yes, thank you. Because what we're really looking at is we are looking to meet our children exactly where they are developmentally.

And you know, even when you're on board, just like a little bit of information about what children are and aren't capable of based on where their brain development is, you'll realize that a lot of the expectations and standards that we have set for children have nothing to do with healthy child development and everything to with this sort of fear-based culture that all live in and we all need to show up and behave a certain way And if you're, if, you have the child who's not sleeping or the childhood's biting or, the, child, who hits or.

The child. Who's acting out or whatever it is. Then you obviously haven't been a good enough parent. You haven. Disciplined enough, even, all of those things.

And I don't think that that's true at all. I think, that, you know, most of the time, the kids that I'm really worried about are the ones who are super well-behaved and sit, criss-cross applesauce, and do, those are ones that are like, oh, like here's my card, because we're going to need to talk about 12 years from now.

This is not going go well. There's going be, so much that had to be squashed down to appease and please the grownups around. And in all of that, it's definitely not that I say, oh, you know, just release your children to the flowery meadows and hope for them to bloom.

That's not it at all. And it is that we really need to get down with the idea that this is something to be approached with compassion and humanity and heart.

and all of those kinds of things so that our children can come through a childhood that they don't have to recover from.

Parenting as mutual growth and healing

And I would go so far as to say that, you know, the mental health crisis that everybody's talking about, a lot of the conflict that happens around the world, like all this could be avoided if we were to listen to our kids and show up compassionately And yes, you know, be firm and put guardrails on the bridge and all of the rest of it.

But deliver on all that with heart. I completely agree. Oh, I had a thought when you were talking about like the really well behaved child who's not reactive, not having stress, you know, expressing their stress and their emotions, it really does, uh, kind of bring it home for, like, for parents and society because we're just not comfortable.

Like, I feel like so much of this discipline is that, is like can we just get people to shove all their feelings in and not express anything? Um, because we were just not comfortable with emotion.

And so that's why when we see babies, like, I remember this one time, remember exactly so clear. I was in a grocery store, um, in Nova Scotia. We were visiting with my son, and he wanted, obviously, all the candy and toys in the store.

It wasn't happening, he was going nuts, completely melting down. and I'm like I got you, we're not getting those things. But like, I see it's upsetting, and I totally understand.

And there was like so many grannies coming up, like trying, just like I don't think you know what you're doing. Like, what's happening here? Or like we're like flashing toys, oh no, look at this, trying to distract him from his feelings or stop them or help me figure it out.

I was, no no. This is how it looks. Like, this is how it looks, right? So, that takes a lot of courage. It really does. To do that in the world, because it's almost like, yeah, it feels almost, like a bizarre horror movie, where it is like if anyone, especially our littles, are like crying or emoting, but everyone just comes and is, Like stop it, stop, how do we stop?

Right. Instead of just letting it happen. Yeah. Right? And we're meant to feel, you know? Like, you have to feel, and the full range of emotion, if you want to be fully human, then you to have feel the range full of it.

And it's a wonderful thing. You know, that's such a great example. I feel like every parent has had that moment. Like, how do you really lean into being available to meeting the needs of that child that's in front of you, not feeling like you have to cave to the people all around you?

Because you're not here in the service of those people. When it comes to your child, you are here, in service, of the child. And, all those folks, well-intentioned, if not a little misdirected, they're grownups and they get to sort themselves out.

They can cope with their distress and their discomfort because they are grown ups and have a grown up brain. And so we can trust them to be capable or not of that, but it has zero reflection on who it is that we are.

Completely. We feel so much pressure as parents, right, especially in public. Yeah. to do that kind of, yeah, like control or like, I'm a good mother.

I can stop my child from tantruming or… Well, and where did we onboard the program that we need to acquiesce? We need be, you know, we to play into the status quo of what everybody around us expects.

Where did on board that kinda thinking? We onboarded that kind of thinking because when we were little children, we reprimanded. If we didn't buy into the party line, if we did not do what everybody expected us to do, then we got in trouble for that.

And so we all learned very early, oh, you've got to actually be subservient to the status quo. We are invited, many of us, by being brought to our knees.

In this experience of trying to navigate being parents, we're invited to grow ourselves just as much as we are, you know, really wanting to support our children in their growth.

Yeah. We have to be regulated in those moments and in charge and all the things that you mentioned. And I was going to ask you that as kind of our last question in the discussion was like, I think so many aspects of parenting a baby are growing us up at the same time, right?

Like our brains as mothers and fathers become plastic. Again, our emotional brain areas can be remolded through all these experiences we have. So we speak a little bit more about how when we are disciplining, you know, in a brain healthy way, that's helping our baby develop, but also us in the process.

I love this question. I think all the time about how we are all ages that we have ever been. So, though I'm 50 years old, you know, there's a one-year-old inside of me and a five- year- old inside me, and 12- years-olds inside.

And what I have often witnessed in the parents that I get to support is that the things that are most challenging for them with their of children are the things that need to be most healed within them in terms of their inner child.

And so as an example, you know, and if we look into the sort of impact on what our programs are and how we develop these, stories that we bring into adulthood and we allow those stories to shape our world, including how parent our children, when we think about where those come from, Like those stories have come from our own childhood.

Resources and closing remarks

They could be even preconception in terms of were we invited in or not, you know, all of that. So you really start to peel the layers of the onion back.

If you have a child who's maybe not sleeping as much or if you a have child whose the big actor outer and lots of hits and kicks and bites or whatever it is, whatever that's pulling up inside of you is probably a relic that pulls you back to your own experiences in that when you were a kid.

And so, you know, as a childhood, if had behaved the way that your child, your actual child is now behaving, What would have happened? Would you have been hit?

would you been punished in some other way? And the answer for most people, because most of us were raised by behaviorists, will be yeah. And so, of course, now you watch, you know, your three-year-old hit your little six-month-old younger sibling.

And of, course there's a, in you, because if you had done that at three, like there would have been hell to pay for it. So now your a little inner three year old is really panicked, but that needs to stop.

It's not safe. Don't do that. Heads are going to roll. and so you get an opportunity in the parenting of the outer child. to retemplate the experience and reparent that inner child.

And it's the dance of that interplay that I think is probably the most potent force as far as what allows us to accept the gift that our children bring us, which is the opportunity to get a do-over.

Beautiful. So beautiful. We can talk to ourselves a little bit in those moments, too, and emphasize and be compassionate for the little one. I love it.

Thank you so much for being here. Will you share a little bit of where people can learn more? Because I know you have lots of books and offerings. Yeah, let us know.

So Dr. Vanessa LaPointe, dear Vanessa laPoint with an E on the end.com is my website. I have two books out so far, Discipline Without Damage, How to Get Your Kids to Behave Without Messing Them Up.

And then also a book called Parenting Right from the Start, which is primarily for parents of young children. I have a program where I work with parents directly.

We've just closed intake for the next six months, but we'll have another cohort coming through probably sometime in the spring of 2026 called the Parent Transformation Journey and there's more info.

about that on my website. I do have a membership community where we do Q and A's and these kinds of things every month. And otherwise, I hang out on social.

i have live that I deal with my husband every Thursday evening. So last night, we were talking about resilience and what that really means. Yeah, lots of activity on Social so you can come hangout on Instagram or Facebook and feel your heart filled up rather than emptied out by the world of social media.

Yes, curate that to your advantage. That's good advice. Oh, wonderful. We'll post all of the links on the episode as well. And it was so good to be with you and thank you so much for all your insight in wisdom.

It was lovely. You made it very easy and I was delighted to get to hang out with. Thank you. Thanks, Dr. V.