

Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective

Episode #204: ADHD and Arguing: How to Stop the Cycle of Negotiation

Mallory: Once we change our minds, once we give in after the escalation, what our child learns is ‘if I just push hard enough’, ‘if I just argue my point enough’, my parent will give in. It's not because your kid's bad. It's not because they're, like, scheming. It's just a pattern that they've learned is that when I escalate to this level, I end up getting what I want. And so that's what they're going to default to.

Katie: Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Mallory: Hello, everyone. Mallory here with Katie and Lori, and today we're unpacking the invisible cycle that fuels a lot of the chaos in ADHD homes.

Katie: Yes, this episode is all about the ‘why’ behind those constant battles.

Lori: And if you're stuck in a pattern of arguing and negotiating, it's not because you're failing and honestly, we've all been there, and trust me, I have been there daily in the past few weeks, so you are definitely not alone. Your family might just be trapped in what we call the conflict loop. And believe me, we know this from personal experience.

Mallory: We sure do. That conflict loop plays out in our homes from time to time, sometimes more than others. So, we today are going to give you five things to know about the conflict loop and how to break out of it. But before we jump into those five tips, we just want to ask you, please, the best way for us to grow this podcast is when our listeners share it with other ADHD families or people who care for your kids, people who love your ADHD child. The more you share and spread the word, the more that we can reach more ADHD families like yours. So, we have a lot to cover today so let's get right to it. What is the conflict loop? What are we even talking about? And why is understanding the conflict loop so important for ADHD families and in ADHD homes? So, let's get to it. So, the conflict loop, it goes like this. It starts out usually when a parent sets a limit or has to tell their child no. Their child wants something, but parent has to say no, not right now. Your child resists. They dig in a little bit deeper, they dig their heels, and they start negotiating. They might start yelling. You might see the early signs of a meltdown. What generally happens next is the parent escalates, too. So, you kind of match your child's level. They've said no, they've dug in their heels. So now you're getting escalated because you're upset that your child's arguing, negotiating with you. And then what usually happens after this kind of escalation, side-by-side, you're escalating each other, is that you give in because you're tired and you don't want to deal with the argument anymore. So, you say fine, do it anyway. Or you change the limit you've set. And we totally get why this happens. You're tired. ADHD parenting is a lot. You've had a full day of work and now you're having to deal with homework or manage screens, whatever it is. And a lot of times, the easiest thing for us to do as parents in the moment is to just give in. You know what? Fine, just do it. One example that we see play out in homes a lot is around screens or video games. So, as you can imagine, let's say it's 7am on Saturday morning, it's not a school day, your kid is pumped. What's the first thing they ask? Is it video game time yet? Can I play video games? And you're like, no, it's 7:00am, no video games. And then they push back, but why? Come on, it's a weekend, it's not a school day. Come on, we don't have anything to do today. And then you start to escalate in kind with them. I said no, it's only 7:00am, right? No, you're not using screens right now. Your child escalates more, you escalate more. And then it gets to a point where you're like, you know what? Fine, play the screen, whatever, I don't care. Play the screen. And that is the conflict loop. And it keeps these behaviors, it keeps the negotiating, it keeps the arguing, it keeps the defiance happening. And that's why we call it the conflict loop. Because it's kind of self-reinforcing.

Lori: Yeah. and again, like you said, it kind of alleviates the situation temporarily, right. So temporarily it's very reinforcing to both the parent and the kid. The kid gets what they want, the parent gets what they want, which is peace and not hearing their kid yelling, fighting, negotiating. And so, it is actually very reinforcing for both kids and parents to just say yes. The problem is, is that long term it perpetuates that behavior and it teaches our kids that negotiating an arguing kind of works.

Mallory: Yeah. And this is not about bad parenting. If you get stuck in this cycle, if you get stuck in the conflict loop, you're not a bad parent.

Lori: You are a parent. Because we all do it. Yes.

Mallory: And your kid is not a bad kid. It's just this powerful cycle that our brains learn and we default to the next time we're presented with that same situation. So, again, like, the conflict loop, it's not about bad parents. It's not about bad kids. It's about a pattern. And this pattern is learned, and it's going to keep going unless we kind of break the loop. Unless we break the cycle.

Katie: Yeah, we have all been there. And another thing to keep in mind is that inconsistent responses from us often lead to inconsistent behavior from our kids. So what that means is maybe you sometimes say yes and you sometimes say no. Well, we can't really fault our kids that they're gonna continue to ask because they're kind of confused, Right? Well, did she mean it? Is she going to say, what's she going to do this time? Because it's really unpredictable. And my favorite example of this is going to Costco with my kids. And I think I've talked about this with you guys before, but I do not enjoy Costco with my kids, because they want to try everything. Oh, let's get this, you know, new cereal. Okay. Yeah, but that's 47 servings of that cereal. If you don't like it, I'm gonna have, I'm gonna be so frustrated, and we're gonna be stuck with this cereal. And so, for me, Costco is it really wears me down, because at the beginning, I am, like, strong, you know, really strong. And I'm like, okay, guys, we're not going to buy any extra things. Here's our list. And I do. I plan it out. I know what we're going for. And then, you know, this is my summer. This is always how it goes in the summer because I bring the kids with me to Costco, and at the beginning of the trip, I'm like, no, we're not going to get that. Yes, we could try the sample, but we're going to get any of that. Maybe we put it on the list for next week, right. And then by the end of the trip, they

are just, like, throwing things in the car. I'm like, okay, fine, whatever. Yes, you can have that popsicle. Because I already said no like 11 times.

Lori: It feels bad when you're saying no 20 times, you feel like a horrible parent because you're just saying no. You're the 'no' parent.

Katie: And I've actually told my kids that, like, it actually, like, drains my sparkle when I have to keep saying no over and over and over. I don't. I naturally am a yes person. I, you know, they talk about, like, you're gonna have a yes year. I'm like, no, I need a no year because I say yes to most things you asked me to do. But you know, everyone has their own thing, right, but for me, I love to say yes. That would be my default every time. But I know that I need to say no at Costco, and I try and I set out with the best of intentions. But why do my kids keep asking? Because by the end of the trip, I'm like, yep. And now I have 64 Aussie bite little granola things that I don't even know if anyone really likes them, but we are gonna eat them because we have a thousand of them. So it's really hard. And I have to take a minute and think about it because I could blame my kids and be like, oh, gosh, they ask for everything. But really, I have to take accountability that I am the one being inconsistent and therefore they do not know what to expect. I say we're sticking to the list, but then we go a little bit off script and the next thing we know we have a cart full of random things and I'm stressed.

Lori: Yeah. And what we sometimes think of is like, well, most of the time I'm consistent. Like, you could be consistent 90% of the time, right. And maybe one day you're having a crazy day and you say yes. And the hard thing is, is if we think about like gambling, like slot machines, think about how reinforcing it is when you win a slot machine. It doesn't happen very often. It's random. And when it's random, it's actually even more reinforcing because you think, oh, well, maybe it's this time that this happens, right. So that kind of, even if you're mostly consistent, but every once in a while, waiver on that, it really backfires. And I, again, I can speak to personal experience here that my husband and I have like, very clear screen limits on like, this is the amount of time that you get for screens. And the other day my daughter is, you know, we're in the pool and she's like, you know, it's summer, we need to do a family movie night. We have, we, we haven't done a family movie night all summer, which, by the way, is not accurate at all. And we had all agreed as a family that we are going to play a game afterwards. We had just got a new game, we're all excited to play it, and they had

already used up their amount of screen time and she's like, but you never let us do this. And we. And melting down, crying. And I look at my husband, I'm like, oh, well, you know, it is kind of the end of summer. Like, let's just do this. And then the next week I have tears and crying and meltdowns wanting a family movie night every single night, just from one that one instance. So again, I, like, I feel this very much right now because we were just living out last night.

Katie: And I think it's really important to point out it's okay if you want to give in into the family movie night or you want to let your kid get the random, you know, 85 pack of popsicles at Costco. But what we're saying is then you can kind of anticipate that they're going to ask again, right, because the limit was set and then it was moved a little bit. So obviously there's going to be so many different situations that come up. And absolutely, we're going to need to change the plan from time to time. And that's pretty cool, right? Like, that was a fun thing when I was a kid to ask my parents and they say no, and then I say please, and then they say yes. Right. Very exciting. But what we're kind of studying here is what is the outcome that you're going to see next time? And we just want to be aware of it so that we can make a plan, kind of know, okay, if I'm not consistent, this probably will happen next.

Mallory: And here's a really important kind of tip to keep in mind, is that if it's a day that you've had a day, and it's going to be really hard for you to follow through on a limit, it's going to be really hard for you to follow through if you tell your child no, it's going to be really hard for you to stick to no screens today for whatever reason, give in sooner than later. Don't give in once you've kind of already escalated through the conflict loop, given right away. So, like Katie is saying, like, there's going to be times we want to change the plan and we want to be spontaneous and we want to break the rules, and that's okay. Do it sooner than later. So back to Lori's example, they're swimming in the pool, they have plans to play a game, but the girls say, instead, can we do a family movie night? Instead of getting into the back and forth like, no, you guys have already had enough screens, we already said we're going to play a game to this escalation, right away given and say, you know what? I love that idea. Let's do that. That would be such a fun summer thing to do. Let's do it. So, if you're going to change the rule, change it sooner. Change it before you get into the escalation of the conflict loop.

Lori: Yeah. Before the arguing starts, because it's the arguing that we don't want to continue in the future. That, you know, it's one thing to say, oh, I have this idea. It's another thing to get into arguments and meltdowns and you know, at worst, you know, aggressive behaviors or things like that.

Mallory: Yeah. Because again, once we change our minds, once we give in after the escalation, what our child learns is if I just push hard enough, if I just argue my point enough, my parent will give in. And that's what we, and again, it's not because your kid's bad. It's not because they're like scheming. It's just a pattern that they've learned is that when I escalate to this level, I end up getting what I want. And so that's what they're going to default to.

Lori: Yeah. And even with an ADHD brain, just on that same note, a lot of times they just like arguing, you know, like that in and of itself is reinforcing to them. So just, you know, sometimes they'll just have an argument for the sake of having an argument about something, even if they want to do the thing, because that conflict is reinforcing.

Mallory: Yeah. It's creating dopamine in their brain. It's exciting. It's stimulating.

Lori: Yep. So, our third thing we want you to know is that consistency doesn't mean being rigid or being harsh. And this is actually something that I have to tell myself and I'm not good about telling myself. Is that reframing, you know, that consistency is actually being kind and clear to our kids. Because one of my kids' responses is like, she's a crier, then I feel like I've hurt her feelings and then I feel bad, like I'm just a mean parent. And sometimes it does feel that way when our kids are asking, like Katie said like 20 times, you just feel like you're a bad, mean parent because you're always saying no. But I think reframing it as it's actually giving our kids the ability to trust us, that consistency helps build that trust and build that safety that they know what to expect from us consistently in our relationship. When your child knows what to expect, their brain feels safe. And a safe brain behaves better, right.

Mallory: 100%. 100%. You know what, this conversation, this point, it makes me think of my mom because my mom reflecting back on herself as a parent when we were still young kids, still living at home, she was this type of parent where she's like, I was a great, fun parent, but I had a hard time when it came to saying no or setting a limit. And my mom was a great mom. Love her. She's probably listening to this. Hi, mom. But it's interesting now to hear her reflect back. Like, it was really hard for me to be consistent and set those limits. But it's really

important for you to hear that being clear and consistent is kind and fair. And it can feel like you're being mean at times, but in the long run, when it comes to your child's behavior and learning, this is what is going to result in the most harmony at home. Okay, so I feel like almost the elephant in the room is like, it's like, okay, sure, like, be consistent, be kind, like, but how? Like, you don't get my house. No, we do. We get it. This is hard. And this is our fourth point. Our fourth tip is that being consistent, especially when you have ADHD in the mix in your home, is tough. When you're tired, when you're touched out, when you're feeling triggered for your own reasons, it is so hard to not get sucked into the conflict loop. It's the easiest thing. It's the most natural thing. And stopping the conflict loop and not matching your child's level of escalation or dysregulation is so hard. It's so hard because a lot of times our own kids dysregulation is the exact thing that triggers our own dysregulation.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. And I know that a lot of us also have ADHD or suspect ADHD. And for me personally, it's really easy for me to see this in my husband. I don't know if anyone else can relate, but like, I see the kids escalating and then I see him sort of escalating, and I immediately am able to be like, oh, wow, you know, you're really reacting to what they're saying. But it's harder when it's myself and I am absolutely a part of the equation. So, it's harder to notice it until I'm actually more dysregulated and then I'm like, okay, I'm actually getting really frustrated. So again, like, really coming up with those strategies and those tools that you need for yourself and just knowing that it is really hard to stay calm when your child is escalating.

Lori: Yeah, I know for me recently, I just feel like it's been really hard, either because I just had more stress or I get sucked into those arguments and those emotions, like, very quickly, and I get escalated. And it's been really helpful sometimes for my husband to, like, step in and be like, whoa, you know, that was harsh, or that was too loud. Or he gives me reminders that one helps me. Like, it is a big reset when he tells me. So, I've kind of asked him and I want him to get that feedback. And sometimes in the moment it's like, it's irritating. But at the same time, like, if he notices that it's escalating too much, like, it's all, obviously, I need to take a break. And a lot of times he's telling me, you need to go calm down and I'll handle it right now. Right. So I think if you're going through a season and I feel like I have been going through a season of like, I'm just getting escalated more quickly, like, knowing that and being able to kind of have that communication with him has been helpful where he can kind of step in and take over if I'm getting sucked into that conflict loop.

Katie: I love that you can take that feedback from him. Lori, because my sister is a therapist and it's absolutely been hilarious, but she has this line that she uses where she's like, I'm actually not open to any feedback at this time. And she says it, like, in various situations, if anyone wants to try it out, it's really empowering. But then you're not sure how that person might respond to you.

Lori: And again, I think it depends on how they give that feedback. And we've had the communication ahead of time that I'm okay with that. We've even had signals in the past where, like, he'll pull his earlobe or all do the same and we're not even saying anything. It's just like a signal that this is escalating and you need to cool it.

Katie: I love that. That actually ties in really well to our fifth point here, which is really, that change starts with us, not our kids. So, breaking the conflict loop, getting out of that cycle, it's not going to require a personality makeover for your child, it really is about shifting how we respond. And so, keeping that in mind, that can be really overwhelming, but it's also kind of hopeful because we know that we are in control of our own responses. And so, it actually takes a little bit of the pressure off of our kids and that relationship and puts it back on us. And we are, you know, are in the process and recently redid our online course Creating Calm to really hone in on this and give specific steps how we can break out of the conflict loop and show up in a much more connected and consistent way. And it's one of my favorite things about this relaunch of the course is I think we did a really great job at illustrating and giving a lot of video examples of what not to do and what to do and strategies, real life things that we're dealing with every day. For us, it's the fight over, my 11-year-old wanting a cell phone, which no, shame on parents, but we are just not there. Okay, she is not there, I am not there. And so, we, there is a conflict loop. And it is very hard in this case because there isn't a giving in on my end because I can't right then. So, it is difficult. But we address these things head on in the new course. We're really excited about it.

Lori: Including the phones and screen time.

Katie: Including the phones. It's definitely something that we know, you know, if you're struggling in this area, you are not alone.

Lori: Absolutely not. And we'll put, we'll link some more information about our new Creating Calm course in the show notes so you guys can check that out, but it's amazing.

Mallory: I'm so excited because I, like Katie said, I really think it's going to be the most practical tips and advice and actionable about how to break out of this conflict loop. Respond with more consistency. Respond in a calm, confident way that's going to get your house feeling a lot more harmonious really fast. So, our key takeaway for you today is that breaking out of this conflict loop isn't about doing more, it's about doing the same thing consistently and calmly. You can break out of the conflict loop. Before we sign off, just one more quick ask if you could please share this episode with someone you think needs to hear it with another ADHD parent. We would be so grateful and as always, we're here to support.

Katie: Thanks for listening to Shining with ADHD by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!