Are Your Kids Driving You Crazy?

Guests: Amber Lia and Wendy Speake
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Bob: Does it surprise you that your toddler disobeys? Wendy Speake says it shouldn't.

Wendy: So often, we'll look at a two-year-old or a three-year-old and they're saying, "No," or doing whatever; and I'll say: "You know what they're doing? They're doing their job.” It is their job, at two, to push those boundaries and find out what life's about. It is my job to stay in control and show them what this life is about.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Monday, June 10th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I'm Bob Lepine. Do you have a strategy, as parents, to help corral your children's impulses/their sinful tendencies?—and to teach them where the boundaries are?—and how's that plan working for you? We're going to spend time talking about triggers and boundaries today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. So, how was it at your house? Did you guys exhibit amazing patience with your boys?

Dave: I did, Bob; I did.

Bob: Did you? [Laughter]

David: But my wife—I was thinking about this, right when you [Ann] were getting ready to go. I thought—I came home one day, and I walk in the house. My boys run to me—they were little at the time: “Mom kicked a hole in the drywall, and it's covered up with wallpaper!” [Laughter] I go, “Where’s the hole?” “It's covered up.” She had, not only kicked a hole in the wall—covered it with wallpaper so I wouldn’t see it.

Ann: This is where we're starting today? [Laughter] "Look at this!"

Bob: The issue we're talking about is the issue of anger and how we get provoked to anger by the children, [whom] we love and adore more that anything else; right? [Laughter]

Ann: I never knew this was in me. If you had asked me, before I got married and had children, “Are you an angry person?” I would have said, “Not at all; I don't even know what you're talking about.”
Bob: I remember hearing Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, one time, say—a mom had come up to her and said, “I was never angry until I had teenagers.” [Laughter] And Nancy said, “You were always angry; it just took teenagers to bring it out of you.”

Ann: Exactly.

Bob: That's a good observation, I think, for all of us to recognize—the seeds are in us. The question is: “What brings it out?”

Dave: “What triggers it?”

Bob: “What causes these seeds to sprout?” and “What do we do when we start to feel that rising up in us?”

We have Amber Lia and Wendy Speake joining us today to help us with this. Ladies, welcome.

Amber: Thank you so much.

Wendy: Thank you so much. It looks like we're in good company.

Amber: Yes; you are our people—you struggle with anger. [Laughter]

Dave: Thank God you're here!

Ann: Oh, my goodness.

Bob: Ann was talking about kicking in the drywall, and Wendy was over here—

Wendy: —raising the roof; yes, sister! [Laughter]

Bob: —going, “I testify to that, right along with you.”

Ann: I'm not one to fake it, so I'm really happy that you're here. I don't think you are, either.

Wendy: No; we're not. You just spoke my heart. I never raised my voice; I had never been yelled at, but I totally get what you mean about looking in that mirror; and you see the eyes bulging, and the nostrils flaring, and the spittle flying. It's like, “What is that?!”

Ann: And you blame your children—like, “Look what you've done to me.” You're exactly right, Bob, those things were already in there; it was just exposed.
Dave: You two have found out that you're not alone—there's a whole community of people that responded to what you said. Tell us the story.

Ann: Yes; how did it start?

Amber: That was the most surprising and blessed part of this whole journey for me. I was a recovering angry mom. I loved my children, like a lot of parents do, but I had struggled with anger towards them—and frustration and, even, yelling. I was very embarrassed by that, and I didn't really want anybody to know; because there was this stigma attached, of course. I hadn't struggled with anger, as a teacher, for ten years. I kept my cool with my students; why was this such a challenge for me, now, as a mom? I was very embarrassed by that.

Eventually, when I started getting a handle on that, God really did a change in my heart and in my life. The key for me was that I didn't realize that a lot of other people were still struggling with this. I started a Facebook® group for moms, who struggle with anger and yelling—there were more than a thousand people that joined in the first week—really, in the first few days.

Ann: —the first few days.

Amber: Yes; and that was my big “Aha!”—like, “I'm not the only one, and there is hope.” God says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all of our unrighteousness.” The Bible encourages us to confess to one another and to share that. I found that, if we can get over that little bit of embarrassment or that stigma that we feel, then we can really find freedom; and we can really walk alongside one another.

Wendy: Healing and transformation, yes, are there.

Amber continued to work in this Facebook group—it became so big, so fast, that she said to the writing team, that we were on for another ministry—she said, “Would anyone like to co-labor with me?” I said, “Yes; I'd love to.” We started doing that together as it grew.

Then, one of the days, we asked: “What are your triggers? What are the things that your kids do?”—actually, I didn't even say that; they didn't need a definition—they knew what a trigger was. Within those first, I don't know—30/40 minutes—hundreds of people: “Why can't they get their shoes on and get in the car when my husband travels?—when I'm exhausted?” Just on and on the triggers went.

The next day, Amber jumped in the group and said: “I'm just going with the very first comment—I'm going to speak to that. Tomorrow, Wendy will address the second one.” We were just meeting the needs of the people in our midst. After, I don't know, maybe 15 days of that, they started saying: “Can you give us this? Can we have this, so we can
share it with others?” Amber called me that day, saying, “This needs to be a book—and fast.” I think that we released it probably two/three months from there.

**Amber:** She said, “I don't have time to do this book right now.” I said: “Wendy, the Holy Spirit is pressing on me hard—we need to do this book, and we need to do it now. You can go ahead and pray about it, but you're going to write this with me.” [Laughter]

**Wendy:** I like that pressure from the Holy Spirit.

**Bob:** The book is called *Triggers*, by the way. It's a book we have in our *FamilyLife Today* Resource Center. *Exchanging Parents' Angry Reactions for Gentle Biblical Responses*. That's a pretty bold claim you're making.

**Wendy:** It's a promise; yes, it really is.

**Bob:** It's a promise? You're saying that a mom, who is daily frustrated by the activities of her kids, can get to a point where she can be at peace and not responding in anger?

**Wendy:** Yes; and here's the deal—we're not addressing our children's behavior that makes us triggered. Instead, we're saying, “Okay; let's look at these 31 scenarios/those 31 triggers.” Instead of saying, “Okay; I've got to get my kids to get their shoes on and get in the car without melting down, so that I don't have to get angry,”—instead, it's just humbly going to God's Word, saying: “God, why am I out of control when they can't get their shoes on? Why am I whining and complaining when they are whining and complaining?”

I think that my whining and complaining is going to help them stop whining and complaining, but it doesn't. And so, instead, these chapters are really about: “What is going on with us?” and “God, I know there's power in Your Word; I know You want to start with me. I want the fruit of Your Spirit in my life.” It really is about *us*.

**Bob:** This is so important because most moms—most dads, for that matter—look at their kids' behavior and say that: “The problem with my anger is that behavior. Fix the behavior and that will fix the anger.”

**Ann:** “It's you!”—right; yes.

**Bob:** You're saying: “No; the problem with the anger is something inside of you that's being triggered here. Let's deal with that.”

**Ann:** Yes; I don't think most people make that turn.

**Wendy:** Right; right.
Ann: They just assume it’s the kid’s fault, without looking inward. How did you discover that?

Amber: It really changed when I was alone, as a mom, whose husband worked very long hours in a town that I had just moved to—a big transition. I remember, very distinctly, one day my husband left for work and I had three kids—four and under at the time. I looked around and the house was kind of a disaster, and I'm a neat-freak; so that was really hard for me, in and of itself.

I looked down at my clothing, and I was in my pajamas. It was late in the morning and that’s kind of okay, but it wasn't that day’s pajamas—it was like the day before the day before’s pajamas. [Laughter] We're going on three days in this same outfit. I was frustrated, and I remember snapping at my kids. Then, there was a knock on the door. [Sound of knocking] I just froze; I was, suddenly, very embarrassed because I realized that maybe somebody had heard me—the way I was talking to my kids just now.

I opened the door, and thank the Lord, it was my neighbor, Joe, who was very old and also a little hard of hearing. [Laughter] I thought: “Okay; good. Maybe I'm safe.” He was just dropping off some tool, or some such thing, that he had borrowed from my husband.

I closed the door, and I very vividly remember saying to the Lord: “Lord, this has to stop. This has to be a turning point for me. I don't want to keep being like this. This is not who I said I was going to be, as a mom. I don’t even recognize myself, and I’m hurting my kids.” So, instead of—when the kids would go down for their very short naps—which in the past, was like my time to just sit, or read a book, or do something for myself—I was like, “Nope; I'm going to get back to having more time with the Lord.”

I sat down and I'd take a couple of verses—and whatever the issue was—if it was that I was speaking words that were unkind to my kids—I took a verse about kindness: “The teaching of kindness is on her tongue,”—and then I would just meditate on that for that half hour. I'd pray and I'd say, “Lord, let my words be kind. Transform me,”—so that is what we’re doing.

You know what? When God made me a kinder gentler mom, as I took one thing at a time—one of my own triggers at a time/one of my own wrong attitudes at a time—and just really connected with the Lord. I set a timer on my phone to go off every couple of hours with that verse to pop up, or I'd write it on the mirror in my bathroom, so it was the first thing I saw in the morning.

Ann: You were very intentional.

Amber: Very, very intentional. I treated my anger issues like it was my new job. That's when the Lord began to take me seriously, as I took this issue seriously. He transformed me. My kids became the kids I was wanting them to be—that I had trained them only to
do when I would yell at them, that was not working. But when I softened, and I came alongside them, and I said: “It looks like you're really upset over that. What can I do to help you?” or “Let's figure this out together,” I didn't get frustrated and, “Aww! Why can't you ever just…?” It was like, “Okay; I'm going to come alongside you, like a good coach would do,”—instead of this punishing authoritarian figure—that's not working for either one of us.

**Bob:** You're saying that intentionally meditating on specific Scriptures, to deal with the issue, fixed the issue.

**Amber:** It did, because it changed my heart. I didn't become perfect, but I really became a much more loving parent in that time. And you know what? Nobody is going to become hardened when somebody else is loving them, relentlessly, in the way that Jesus loves us. When I grew in my love relationship with the Lord in that way, and I poured that out on my kids, they could not help but be transformed. They were dealing with their frustrations and their triggers better because they saw me modeling that. They were being filled by the love of Christ that the Lord privileged me to give to them as their mom.

**Ann:** It sounds like you were exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit. As I'm listening to you, I'm thinking: “You're connecting with God—

**Wendy:** “You’re abiding.”

**Ann:** —“yes; you’re abiding in the Vine; you're exhibiting love, and joy, and peace. And then, as you went to your kids like that, they couldn't blame you, then, for their anger issue or the issues that they're dealing with.

**Amber:** That's right.

**Wendy:** That really is a big deal—when the kids do wrong and we come in—again, with the eyes bulging, and the nostrils flaring, and the spittle flying—we steal the teachable moment. We make the wrong behavior about our wrong behavior rather than keeping the main thing the main thing. We have completely robbed them of that teachable moment.

When we can stay kind, there's an opportunity for them to experience repentance. I'm reminded that speaking of kindness was the first example that Amber just shared—that she meditated on that. One of my favorite verses is Romans 2:4, which talks about the kindness of the Lord is what has led us to repentance. I was thinking, “For goodness sake, [He] has only ever been a kind Father that has led me to repentance about my wrong behavior.” And yet, I think that my angry, strong, sticking-my-finger-in-his-face response to my kid when he does wrong is going to make him repentant? But the kindness of the Lord—and that does not mean permissiveness—I'm not saying: “It's
okay that you just hit your brother, and called the other one a jerk, and stomped off to your room.”

**Ann:** Let's go right there—that's going on in the room—they just punched each other and called each other a name. You're seeing it—walk us through what you would do in that scenario.

**Wendy:** I'll tell you, first of all, what I used to do—I would go out of control, because they were out of control. Instead, I had to realize God, in His kindness to them, gave them to me; so I can do the job of staying in control. So often, we'll look at a two-year-old or a three-year-old and they're saying, “No,” or doing whatever; and I'll say: “You know what they're doing? They're doing their job. It is their job, at two, to push those boundaries and find out what life's about; and it is my job to stay in control and show them.”

I use the analogy of the boxing ring: “Ding, ding, ding”—I'll even say it out loud. Even though my kids are teenagers now, [Laughter] I'll just make that noise—like: “Everybody to your corners, because this is not a fighting ring here.” Now, what I used to do, of course, is climb into that ring and start swinging with my words because they were. But now, I realize, “No; a coach stays on the outside of the ring.” Oftentimes, calling them to their corner means that I'll take them by their hand, when they're little, and walk them to their room. I'll say: “Listen, this isn't a time-out; it's not a punishment. It's a gift—you're not in control of the way I know you want to speak to your brother or to me. You need some quiet time—you can read; you can play—but you may not be with us because you've not been kind.”

Amber and I have a quote in *Triggers* that's my favorite—it says, “Figure out what you mean to say before you say something mean.” I really think that's so much of what—I mean, “Yes; spend time in the Word—it starts there—but then, what I found I had to do was make better plans; because what was coming, naturally, from me wasn't kind. And so, back to the idea of the fruit of the Spirit—abide with Him; He'll abide with you, and you will bear His fruit. But in the meantime, you've also got to stop yelling.”

I would really say to those of you listening, “If you're yelling, I hope that you will abide with the Lord and His Word, and His transformative Word will get in your heart and it will blossom out in your behavior. But in the meantime, if you are yelling, there is an element of: ‘That behavior needs to stop, and you need to make a better plan.’”

What's a better plan when your kids are arguing? Maybe your plan is, from now on, I walk up to them—instead of coming in, ready for a fight—and I take them by the hand and say: “Everybody to your corners. We'll talk about this when everybody's calm,”—we call that a script.
Amber: Yes; we really encourage parents to stop parenting in the middle of the conflict or directly in the aftermath of the conflict. When I’m emotional about something or upset, I’m not very teachable; and yet, we think our kids will be. We think, if we try to tell them what to do and how to do it right in the middle of that conflict, then they’re going to listen to us and be like: “Oh, okay. Yes; sure, mom. That makes sense.” [Laughter]

Wendy: “Beautiful wisdom.”

Amber: “No problem!” But that’s rarely the case.

We do say that it’s really good for the kids to take a break in a lot of these heightened emotional moments. It's good for mom and dad to take a break—we call it a “holy pause.” We get our minds back in the right frame of mind, and then our kids are much more open to hearing what we have to say when we can come alongside them a little bit later.

It's not that we're trying to keep a record of wrongs—we're not bringing up the past over and over again—we're saying, “Hey, do you remember, earlier this morning, when you and your brother were fighting over the TV controller?—and how you whacked him over the head with that.” You can just ask him questions: “How do you think that made him feel? Is there a better strategy that you could use next time? I really want to help you; and I bet that you have good ideas about how you could have handled that differently—in a way that meets one of our family values, where we value our relationships and we keep our hands to ourselves.”

Bob: There's a passage in the Bible that is a parenting passage—that most people don't think of as a parenting passage—and it's what you guys are talking about right here. It's in 2 Timothy, Chapter 3. We're familiar with this as a passage that talks about the authority and the inspiration of Scripture and why Scripture can be counted on and believed, but it's in the middle of a parenting context.

Paul is talking to Timothy and he says, “From your childhood, you've been acquainted with the sacred writings,” / “Your parents taught you the Scriptures”—your mom, in this case—“Your mom and your grandma taught you the sacred Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.” And then it says this: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and it is profitable for”—here's the parenting part—“teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness.” That's parenting—you have to keep teaching, and correcting, and reproving, and training in a continual cycle.

The time to do it is not, as you said, is not in the middle of the escalation; but it's the next day when things are fine and you say, “Remember yesterday?” Now, it's a teaching moment here: “Let's talk about what this looks like, and let's practice it. Here's what you did yesterday. Let's do a little game, where you play this; and I'll play this,” and you just role play it.
Ann: Yes.

Bob: Help them develop a new habit/a new pattern and they'll light up to that. They'll respond to that; won't they?

Wendy: Absolutely; young kids especially, I would find we would do this: “Hey guys, we're going to practice leaving the park,” or “We're going to practice clearing our plates,” “But we are clearing our plates,” “No; this is practice.” [Laughter] They would get on board, and they would do it.

Something that I love about that Scripture, though, is that you can look at it, and I think a lot of parents have the tendency to take that as an invitation to parent with a lot of strength and anger, throwing Bible verses at their kids—“This is so that you can correct them and reprove them!”—when, really, it’s: “No; we spend time in the Word and the Word of God will bear fruit in our lives. We will be taught, and we will be corrected, and we will be ready to teach and correct our children.”

But back to what Amber started this whole conversation with—it really started with going back to the Word.

Amber: I encourage families and moms, in particular, to consider themselves as coaches—that they are mom, as coach. When I was a high school English teacher, years ago, I had a student named Stacy. Part way through the year, Stacy was about to have this Presidential fitness test for P.E. She had to run a lap, and it was an exhausting thing for her; she had never passed it before.

On testing day, it happened to be that my prep period was during Stacy's P.E. period. I went down to the field, and I stood there and I was cheering her on; she was not doing very well at all. She was coming along; she was tired. As she came around, I was like, “I've got to get right down there and give her a couple of tips.” I jogged alongside her for a minute and said: “Stacy, put your shoulders back; take a deep breath. You can do it! I believe in you. I know this is going to be the year that you're going to pass it!”

Long story short, just before the time was up, she crossed that chalk line. About ten years later, her mom wrote to me and she said: “I just want you to know that moment with Stacy was a pivotal moment in her life. She realized someone really cared about her.” It was like a light bulb for me: “This is what I'm supposed to be doing with my kids. I'm supposed to be coaching them and, really, I need to do what a good coach does—they inspire; and they come alongside; and like you said, Bob, they set up practices—like Wendy shared. That's great coaching; that's great stewardship of that Scripture verse.

Bob: Yes; so if you look at what you're doing with your kids and you say: “How much time is spent training in righteousness? How much time is spent instructing versus how
much time is spent correcting and reproving?” You will find there is less correcting and reproving if you're doing more training and instructing.

Amber: —and doing it in a loving/gentle way.


Ann: I can't wait to talk more.

Bob: Parents are like: “Just send me the book now!”

Ann: Yes.

Bob: “You have named the issues for us.”

Wendy: And look at the second page of that Table of Contents. The first are all about the kids, but the second page—they're all about us: “Our Depression,”—

Bob: “Noise,” “Messy Homes.”

Wendy: —“Exhaustion.”

Bob: “Multi-tasking,” “Transitions.”

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I think all of us, as parents, have been asking the question today: “What are my triggers? What are the things that my kids do that set me off?” and then, “How can I open myself up for the Holy Spirit to do a work in those areas?”

David Robbins, who is the President of FamilyLife, is here with us—this is an issue every parent has to deal with.

**David:** Yes; I feel like I get to practice this every day. [Laughter] I mean, the entire conversation is like: “How do I not trigger?” [Laughter]

You know, Jesus is concerned, not just about our external behavior, but about the internal drivers and getting into the crevices of our hearts, not just addressing the outside. Matthew 23 is where He calls some of the Scribes and Pharisees white-washed tombs, because their internal and external confessions didn't match.

**Bob:** Right.

**David:** In a similar context, in Matthew 12, He says, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” That's the same root and zeal that's been driving the entire conversation today. I love how Amber and Wendy are not content in leading us to stopping re-parenting—that's not the end game—but they're going after the internal root of what's driving us to that behavior and helping us meet Jesus in that place.

You know, I've got kids—we joked at the beginning, because it's real.

**Bob:** Right.

**David:** I've got kids, 12 to 2. I find it both encouraging and, practically, really challenging; but I think this is the type of conversation, that if Jesus was here with us, helping us with our parenting, He'd be having this type of conversations with us as parents.

**Bob:** And this is a part of how He is at work in our lives and working out our salvation with fear and trembling. That's good, David; thank you.

We're, actually, going to talk more about these triggers tomorrow as we visit, again, with Amber Lia and Wendy Speake. So, if this is an issue, I hope you can join us back tomorrow. And if it's not an issue, maybe we should have you on; and you can explain to us what you've learned. [Learned]

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I'm Bob Lepine. We will see you next time for another edition of *FamilyLife Today.*
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