

Week 4: The Importance of Connection



"I don't think anyone can grow unless he is accepted exactly as he is"
~ Fred Rogers

Welcome to our final week of Sharing Control. I do hope that you have found the course thus far to be beneficial to your experiences with your children and that you are starting to find alternate ways of engaging them in the realm of discipline. This last week we will focus on the issue of connection, perhaps the most important tool we have when looking at all areas of discipline. I hope the idea of connection has already started festering in your brain as you've been taking this course, for it has been mentioned tangentially quite a bit, but today we'll make it explicit and talk about the various ways that connection can influence behaviours, how to build and repair these connections, how connection plays a role in boundaries and consequences, including how to handle that ever popular idea that you are not your child's best friend. And of course, we'll look at how connection can play a role in our common issues section. For your homework this week, you'll be working on finding ways to connect with the children in your life in ways that speak to them. Let's get started...

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Section 1: The Link Between Behaviour and Connection

At the very core of our behaviour is how we feel; thus if all else is equal, a child who feels good physically and emotionally will be better behaved. Now, I want to be clear – though hopefully this is unnecessary at this stage – that “better behaved” does not mean obedient. It means the child is more likely to work with us than against us, to avoid common power struggles, and to be open to discussion about disagreements rather than throwing a tantrum. In most cases, the most well-adjusted children will not blindly follow along because we’ve actually taught them to have their own moral compass and thus they will require explanations and involve themselves in the decision-making when things affect them. They will, in other words, own the control we give them.

Why is it that behaviour is so inextricably linked to how we feel? The physical side is easy to explain: If we feel sick or off, our resources are limited as our body fights whatever else is going on and this leaves less for our attentional capacities. When we can’t focus on what is going on around us appropriately, we feel anxious and stressed out which leads to acting out. The emotional side is no different except instead of those resources being limited due to illness, they are limited because we have become self-focused. Remember when I spoke about how punishment can lead to narcissism because the child is so focused on their own arousal, they fail to consider or care about their effects on others? A similar process is in place when our children don’t feel emotionally full and in turn their behaviours become solely about their immediate needs and often expressed incoherently.

On the flipside, when our children are healthy and feel loved and secure in that love, their anxiety decreases and they can focus their energies towards other pursuits and leaves room for them to emotionally tackle difficult situations that may arise. This isn’t to say that healthy and loved children don’t lose their shit sometimes – we all do – sometimes what they face is still so overwhelming they just don’t have the skills and capacity to cope. The difference is that they are often open to receiving our help and support much faster and will not act out *against us* during these moments; they see us adults as a source of support and strength, not the person to be fighting against.

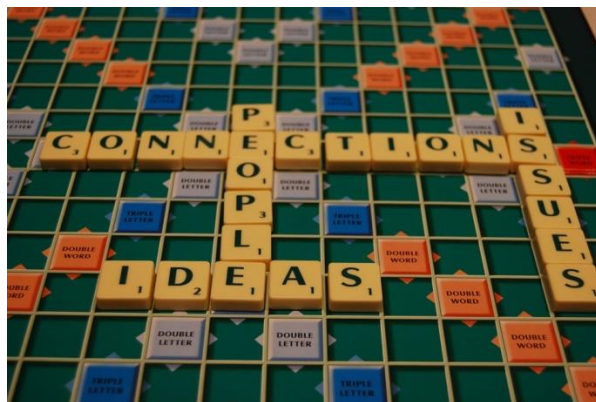
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If we think about the process of development as being about learning and growing, we see that there is a clear need to be open to change. As we develop, we change. As we grow, the expectations on us change. And whether we like it or not, the world around us changes. However, change is inherently terrifying to us as humans, and especially as children. One of the things that researchers and clinicians who work with children who have been abused struggle to explain to others is this intense need for predictability. For children that have experience abuse, they often act out when faced with kinder environments, something most people have trouble understanding; after all, wouldn't a good environment be better? But this comes down to how anxiety-provoking it is to not know what to expect. A harsh, abusive environment is awful, but at least you know what's coming so you can prepare, but moving to a new kinder environment just leaves you wondering when the bad is going to happen, so you create it yourself. Again, this is why some researchers find the worst outcomes are for those kids who have the disorganized attachment – the one characterised by parental extremes.

When a child feels loved for who they are, no matter what they do or how they feel, they can face change because there is no fear of that love being taken away. That love and safety net is the predictability they need to face these changes that are all-too-common in life. If you think about your own experiences, even as an adult, is it easier to face a change in job or a move across the country when you feel supported and loved by those around you versus if you feel alone? I would imagine it is easier when you feel loved and supported, it certainly is for me. This is because our energies can go into these new ventures and facing change as opposed to the ongoing quest to feel loved and accepted, one of our basic human needs. When you don't strive to convince someone you are worthy, you are able to sit in their love and that gives you the strength to move forward.

Importantly, this applies to all adults, not just parents. Often we think that parents have to be the ones children can find this peace and feelings of love with, but sadly not all children have that (though I certainly wish they did). When we look at the research on resiliency, there is a clear effect of genetics (something I'll be talking about in the Orchid Child course), but there is also a huge effect of having someone there who the child feels supports them and accepts them. This can be a teacher, extended family member, family friend, religious leader, etc. This means when we consider the role of connection with children, we can't just think of it as a parent-child issue, but rather as a way in which we approach *all* children we have contact with. You may not know what is going on in a child's life and your mindful and connected approach may make a world of difference to a given child, even if you aren't aware of it.

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Section 2: Building Connections

Knowing the importance of connection to our children's behaviour, we have to look at how we build these connections with our kids. Of course there's the very basic answer that we need to be sensitive and responsive parents who respect our children for the individual people they are. You are already on that path by setting appropriate expectations, focusing on how to teach your child when they struggle, and respecting their individual strengths and weaknesses. You have to be responsive to their distress, minimizing expressions of anger or disappointment, and instead focus on how to empathize and help them move forward from a difficult situation.

But wrapped up in all of this is love. Not just us saying we love our kids, but the way in which we actively display our love for our children and, perhaps more importantly, how our children understand and receive our love. Some of you will have heard of or even read *The Five Love Languages*. It's a book I do appreciate even though I have some caveats as a non-Christian (it has a religious bent) and as someone who still disagrees about punishment (as they generally advocate against it but still throw it in there as needed in certain cases), but the idea of the ways in which our children receive and experience love is something I find essential for any parent. I won't be repeating much of their work here (it's theirs after all), but I do recommend giving the book a read through, even if just the one chapter that summarizes the five languages, to get a sense of the ways love can be expressed and received.

What I would like to focus on here is the development of how our children move through stages of experiencing love. The *Love Languages* work really applies to older children and adolescents and younger children seem to be left out of the equation so I want to start with our younger kids in this discussion.

How do young children experience love? The answer centers on *time*. Of course, if you spend all the time in the world being awful, the child does not experience love, but their understanding of love comes from positive experiences built up over and over again. Remember back to week one and our discussion of how the brain develops and how repetition is key for children to learn a concept, even the implicit ones? This is one of those cases where the implicit understanding of being loved comes from *many repeated interactions* in which the adult demonstrates their affection and love through physical touch, responsiveness, and fun. Doing this stuff once in a while does not instill love, but the repetition is what

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is needed. There is a great quote that captures the essence of this and it goes: *Young children spell love t-i-m-e*. When our children are infants and young toddlers, we hopefully get to inundate them with these experiences, helping their brains build up the expectation that we are there for them and love them in all moments, not just when they are good.

But our children age and our children become older toddlers and preschoolers who are seeking some independence from us and finding their own way in this world. The time we spend with them often starts to decrease around this age. Interestingly enough it also happens to be one of the most trying times for parents in terms of behavioural issues. There is lots going on developmentally, but one of the things that shifts is their experience of love. We often have less time with them and for some children, this can be experienced as less love. It doesn't matter if that time apart is instigated by them or not, but the feelings of connection they had start to lessen and this can feel catastrophic. The Orchid Child is particularly sensitive to this and why parenting them can be so much harder.

In this stage, it is essential that we find new ways to help our children experience our love when we aren't with them. Our job is to ensure that they learn we love them even when we aren't there and the easiest way to do this is to take the time to highlight things they do that we love that we aren't necessarily involved in. The following sentences (or ones like them) are ones you should be using daily with younger kids and more sensitive older kids and at least every few days with everyone you love; they all highlight that there can be separation but that your love exists beyond that separation:

- I love watching you...
- I loved hearing about your day/when you did X/your thoughts
- I loved when you did...
- Just thinking of you fills my heart with love
- I missed you when we were apart today

Now as they get even older, we have to face new transitions and changes as childhood brings with it the label. Yes, childhood seems to be about what label we give our kids. Are they smart? Athletic? Kind? The goody two-shoes? The troublemaker? The nerd? Not all labels are positive, but even the positive ones can carry with them their own baggage that makes childhood more difficult than it should be. We cannot be the ones to take part in this; we need to be the ones that eschew the label in favour of showing our children how much value they carry *regardless of any other label they may face*. They have to be able to fail at every single thing and know that we still believe they have value because only then will they have the strength to keep going.

How do we show our children we value them? It's quite simple really – we tell them. Not only when they have done something good and not only as a pick-me-up after failing; our kids are smart enough to pick up on the implications of those bits of timing. No, we do it regularly and at random times. I often recommend when talking to families about this to set a timer on your phone for daily or even every other day and when it goes off, you tell your child something you value and appreciate about them. It can be the smallest thing, like how they put on their shirt that morning, or it can be bigger, like how they helped a friend in need. The mix of small and big is important so never feel that any act is too small to

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recognize. An added joy of this activity is that you should find yourself noticing far more about your child than you did before; the more you acknowledge, the easier it becomes, creating a very positive cycle.

During this same period (preschool through childhood), time spent decreases even more and can be hard to make room for in our hectic lives. I do recommend spending some time connecting regularly, doing something you both enjoy. I know most people talk about child-led activities and sometimes that's a good idea, but only if you can actually get involved because the last thing a kid needs is a distracted or agitated parent spending time with them to make them feel worse about themselves. The key to doing this is to set the time aside (daily when younger and then it may move to weekly) and make it incredibly clear to your child how much you enjoy spending this time with them; without making it explicit that we are prioritizing this time, it can feel like it's just another part of the day for them, one they value, but don't know how much you value.

A small trick I recommend is that if you are doing daily time and you have to set a timer (very normal), set it for a few minutes *less* than you plan to do with your child so that when it goes off you can say that even though you need to do other things, you're having so much fun, you'll go an extra 3-5 minutes. This can help reduce sadness over the end of this special time and really helps your child feel loved.

By the teenage years, you will hopefully still have some regular one-on-one time with your child and you will still use language to express your appreciation of them and to show how much you love and value them. However, this is where you need to find what makes your kid tick. Take note of the times they really seem to feel connected to you and happy and they are engaging as you would hope with few difficulties, then see if you can pinpoint the types of behaviours you (and/or your partner) are doing to facilitate this. It may be more quality time, it may be when you do things that are meaningful to them, etc., but whatever it is, you need to identify and ensure you work that into a regular event.

Section 2a: Building Connections in the Classroom

So far the suggestions are quite pertinent to parents, but are less applicable to the teachers here. Of course teachers are limited in their ability to connect in some ways; many schools ban physical contact in a misguided attempt to end abuse and there is limited time to forge such a connection with a child. However, the one area that is left open for teachers at all levels is the use of language. All teachers should be sensitive and responsive, but they can add to this the ability to speak in a connecting manner by highlighting the value each child has no matter what is going on in the classroom. This may be difficult if a child is one who is regularly acting up, but if you cannot find one thing you value about the child, you have not tried hard enough. No matter the age, this 1-1 time and the language you use around feedback can make or break a child.

Activities in the classroom that highlight appreciation for students by you, the teacher, and by other students can have a lasting, positive impact on the children. These activities are also helpful in reducing bullying and help build perspective-taking skills as kids think about the other people and what they do and how they feel. The key to these activities is not to have it be something that will instill negativity in

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other children. For example, in my Grade 2 year, our teacher gave out a trophy each day to the best student; this was lovely when you got it (and he made sure we all got it), but it also led to disappointment when we didn't get it or didn't get it as much as someone else. For some kids who may be prone to anxiety or internalizing, this can be devastating. Instead, you may want to do something like pick a child each week and have everyone send messages about what they like about that child, with you as moderator of course; this means you may need to meet with each child 1-1 to see what they are doing, but the end result should be worth it.

Section 2b: Filling an Empty Tank

Life gets hectic. Things come up and despite all our best intentions, that special time, that connection time, that we plan with our kids can fall by the wayside. To top it off, we may be stressed out, short tempered, or distracted, all of which add to our kids' anxieties. Before you know it, your child is acting out again and you don't quite know how you got there. The problem when our kids' tanks run empty is that we can't just go back to the maintenance of once a week or even month of time spent, but rather we need to jump start the process so that maintenance is exactly what it sounds like – maintaining that healthy connection. Think about it like if your iron levels got low, you would need to take strong supplements to get them back up before being able to just go on lower levels to maintain your health. It's the same with our children's emotional health and their need for connection with us.

In order to fill an empty tank, we first have to take stock of ourselves for we cannot fill someone else's tank when ours is empty too. Often we fall short with our kids because we haven't been able to care for ourselves as we should and this has the cascading effect. Now, this doesn't mean you come first here, but rather you need to make plans for *both of you* in this situation. Luckily as an adult, often making smaller changes can have a profound impact, which then gives you the energy and mental capacity to provide for your child. Thus I recommend making a plan to do something for you that lets you relax on a daily basis, whether it's yoga, meditation, a hot bath, reading a book for a spell, whatever. While you implement that, you can also start the intense filling up of your child's tank.

Obviously every child will have different needs, but almost all need some real time together to start this process, not just the 10-20 minutes we may do daily or even the hour we may put in weekly. When going from empty, we may need to dedicate a full day to our kids being truly *with* them and talking about what has been going on. In these spaces it is not only appropriate, but advisable, to talk about how you may have been distracted lately or stressed out. Giving words to the child's experience and validating the struggles they may have had at this time helps them better understand their own emotional states and how they can cope with them going forward. Talk about how they can come to you when they feel they need more connection and that you will find ways to make that time happen, even when everything else seems to be chaotic.

After having this time with them, you can go back to the maintenance routine or perhaps acknowledge you may need one more big day in the near future to get that connection to where you want it to be. This will all depend on what is going on in each of your lives, but know that that extra time and open discussion will always be the best jumpstart to filling that empty tank.

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Section 3: Connection in Teaching Boundaries and Experiencing Consequences

Connection is the crucial ingredient to all of our teaching and discipline. If we aren't connected, we aren't effectively teaching because of the aforementioned links between behaviour and connection. Our kids need us to be *with them* as they learn about these big concepts and face the natural consequences that come from trying and failing. As such, us adults have a crucial role in ensuring that this connection is kept, especially when it seems hardest.

Section 3a: Connection and Boundaries

When we talk about teaching anything, we have to start with the fact that the relationship between the teacher and the student is essential to the student learning anything. We have ample evidence from the education realm that the "fit" between teacher and child has a huge impact on how well the child does, both behaviourally and in terms of learning. As the adults teach some big concepts when it comes to boundaries, the connection you have with your child is therefore of the utmost importance both when you are teaching and outside that moment.

As we have talked about building general connections, here I want to review the types of connections that are relevant *to the teaching process*:

1. Physical connection. When we are teaching a child, sometimes having a physical connection helps us establish that shared focus that is necessary for teaching. This can be even more crucial if the child is having a hard time as our physical presence can be used to help regulate their emotional state, reducing anxiety and stress so they can focus better and actually have a chance at learning. When you are physically connected, you can see if they are listening and it shows them that you are there with them.
 - For example, if you have a child that is struggling with cleaning up, you can get down and touch them or hug them as you talk about the reasons why we clean and help them find ways to make the task more doable for them.

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2. Removing power. How we speak to our children when we are in the midst of teaching can suggest a positive relationship or one where power comes into play. The goal should always be this shared control and the idea that we think well of our kids, things that often get lost in translation when we are teaching certain boundaries.
 - For example, if you are talking to a child that is hitting and you are working towards stopping it, a common answer is to say, “I won’t let you hit me”, but this immediately brings up the power structure and implies the child *wants* to hurt you instead of being a child that is acting out of a hard time. Instead, I recommend saying, “I’m going to help you stop hurting me” and perhaps even add in, “Because I don’t think you want to”.
3. Finding positives. When we take the time to note what our children are doing well, we help build up our connections with them, as they feel loved and appreciated, and this allows them to be more receptive to other things we hope to teach. Even in moments when they may have failed to fully grasp and implement a boundary, you can take the time to note what they *did* do right.
 - For example, if you are working on teaching the value of homework and your child did some but not all, you can focus on the positives of what they did do and then help them link how they might apply that same behaviour towards the rest of their work. That is, talk about what allowed them to get that piece of work done and then help them see how they can use that to get more done.
 - Another example is when you have a child who is learning to tidy up regularly and struggles to get through it all. If you set shorter intervals, you can focus on the smaller achievements (like 5 minutes of cleaning) on their way to actually learning the entire boundary.
4. Rituals. Sometimes we try to teach kids things that they just aren’t interested in or they don’t quite grasp the importance of (either because they are too young or don’t have the experience to understand). In these moments, making the learning a process that includes connection with you as opposed to just a routine can help them make the transition to learning and actively doing.
 - For example, if you have a child that refuses to share, you can change the way you approach sharing to include times when you sit around and talk about items that are important, how we feel about these items, and then invite the child to share their item with everyone in a way that they are comfortable with (showing it, letting people touch gently, etc.). You may come up with a song about how we are connected to our items and how we feel about them. Then focus on the feeling of gratitude of having something important shared with you and do the same with one of your own items. This allows the child to see sharing as a means of connecting with others in ways that they appreciate and with things like songs or rhymes, they may feel more comfortable sharing with others in other moments.
5. Doing things with them. In the moment, our children are more likely to do things and learn things we are doing too – again, going to modeling, but also ‘wanting to be a part of things’. The more we

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do the things we want them to learn and invite them to participate with us, the more likely they are to do this.

- For example, if you are teaching healthy eating habits to your child, then you need to be sitting down and eating the healthy options with them. You won't make them eat, but by watching you take part in eating these healthy choices, they may become more interested in trying these things out too.
6. Sharing struggles. When your child is struggling to learn something that you want them to, it can be very helpful to share that struggle with them by explaining those you have gone through. So many kids think that they alone are the ones to have troubles, and they internalize these moments in a way that makes them self-focused and unwilling to want to learn anymore because they feel bad. When we can share the struggles we have faced, we give them hope that they too can come out the other side.
- For example, if you have a child struggling with homework, you can share the struggles you had with homework too and how you may have overcome them. Or if you didn't, you can share how you still survived to get where you are and what you may have learned since.

Section 3b: Connection and Consequences

Connection is equally important when we are facing natural or logical consequences. In fact, the *lack* of connection in punishment is part of why it can be so damaging to our children; if we think about it, punishment is inherently about love withdrawal, because no matter what action is part of the punishment, we cannot enforce it without a level of withdrawal from them. I've said it before and I'm saying it again, *love withdrawal should never, ever be used as a consequence*. When we use this, we only lead our children down a path where they try to avoid us when they make mistakes. This quote perfectly summarizes why:

"I never want my children to mess up and think, 'My parents are gonna kill me.' I want their first reaction to be, 'I need to call my mom and dad.'"

~ Ashley Brionne via Instagram

Importantly, the biggest risk we face in logical consequences is this lack of connection, which is why I was so clear that you have to be able to remove yourself from it in order for it to be successfully logical. Please don't forget that. Now, as natural and logical consequences are supposed to be seen as things that happen outside of us, it can seem hard to see how connection plays a role, but it does. Primarily, connection happens here through empathy and shared experiences. Let's focus on the case of negative consequences as they are, frankly, the ones we need to worry about most. In these cases, the child experiences something unpleasant, but something that should ultimately help them learn. As discussed last week, the child will often feel negative emotions, things that are hard for us to cope with (which is why we sometimes try to avoid these consequences altogether) and so connection first comes through us being there to empathize with them and support them through the hard times.

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I know some people will question if this is valid. There is a mindset out there that if our children experience support when they face a negative consequence, somehow that negative consequence won't have the impact it should. Bullshit. Remember: the consequence is outside of you so their learning from it happens as long as you don't actually remove the consequence. The emotional support is something completely different and actually allows them not to get too caught up in trying to regulate their emotional state, which in and of itself will prevent learning. So not only does emotional support not inhibit learning, it actually facilitates it.

The second way we connect with consequences is through shared experience. This is similar to the shared experiences in teaching boundaries in that we use our experiences to help our children see that they are not alone in facing these consequences and being able to come out the other side. I will share a personal anecdote here where my daughter was quite upset and embarrassed after made some cards and sent the wrong one to someone so they got one with someone else's name on it which they were confused by. She was horrified (she's an Orchid so this tends to be the type of thing that can result in deep feelings) and so I decided now was the time to share when I had two emails going at the same time – one to my PhD supervisor and one to my husband – and I accidentally ended the one to my PhD supervisor with "Love you!". (That was a nicely awkward conversation later.) Immediately, my daughter felt better as she had never considered that this mistake had been done before and that the natural consequence of being embarrassed was shared; knowing it was made all the difference in the world and she could move from being stuck in her own emotional world to being able to think about how to make it better (for she really wanted to).

I think that the one question you can ask yourself when it comes to consequences is this: Does this consequence and your ability to respond with it help or harm your relationship with the child? If it harms in any way, let it go, it's not worth it.



Section 4: "I'm Not Your Best Friend"

I'm sure we've all heard the saying, "You're not your child's best friend, you're their parent." It's true, but it's often used inappropriately (in my opinion) because the focus is on making a justification for parenting as a hierarchical relationship in which you have to exert control. Now, as I've said before, yes,

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you have natural authority over your child, but only for a period of time and this authority does not actually allow you to control various elements of their lives. Thus, as a parent, we have to focus on the larger picture: the relationship.

Unfortunately, many parents go to the other side and act more like a best friend, which carries with it its own set of problems. In most of these cases, the behaviours of the parent mimic that of a best friend and thus they refuse to be the adult in the situation which perpetuates negative behaviours and a failure to teach. So again, the relationship can be compromised because it's based on a faulty premise and one that cannot be sustained without risk of harm to the child.

What are some of the key differences between best friends and parents that we need to be cognizant of? What are elements we should keep?

1. Best friends are often of a similar developmental stage and thus they can fail to act appropriately, especially when the decision is hard. This is perhaps *the most* important differentiation for us as parents because our job as a parent is to make the hard decisions when they are in our child's best interests. If we take the view that we can't teach our kids or we leave important decisions solely up to them without our input, we have failed. This is often the case when our children are struggling with something and we don't want to add fuel to the fire, whether it's an eating disorder, depression, anxiety, and so on. Parents who focus on ideas that are at the developmental level of the child are not often doing what is best for the child and this can have long term repercussions. In fact, parents here can actually harm their relationship with the child because as the child gets older, they see what the parent didn't do for them and can harbour resentment.
2. Trust with best friends is about secrets, with adults it should be about having our best interest at heart. In line with doing what a best friend might, parents will often pull the "trust" card in trying to justify inaction, but trust only works if it's the right kind. When it's our friends, we think about trust as doing what we ask, keeping secrets, and so on; with adults it *has* to be doing what's right and not lying to our kids about it, they have to trust that we will take care of them. When we start out involving them and providing some control, but being clear about what our priorities need to be, we can still have their trust, but it's a different type than with a best friend.
3. Best friends change over time, parents don't (usually). You simply cannot compare transient relationships to that of a parent and child. You don't *want* your relationship to be transient with your child and luckily there is often a bond that transcends these decisions, but the more we treat the relationship as a best friend *or* an authoritarian, we lose that bond that keeps our children close to us throughout their lives.
4. Best friends listen, and so should parents. This is one of the areas where parents can take a page from the best friend book. Our best friends are often our besties because they actually listen to us, and when parents don't listen (as in the authoritarian type of parenting), our children tune us out, feel unheard, or just don't feel like we love them. This is why I say making the right decision cannot be done unilaterally in most cases (there are exceptions when a child is in grave danger) but must

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come from listening and talking to the child in question. But if we want to keep that strong bond with our kids, we need to listen.

5. Best friends don't judge. Again, if we show disgust or try to shame or embarrass our children in efforts to get them to go along, we fail. Best friends are there and accept our kids for who they are, exactly what we need to be doing. When we start from a place of acceptance instead of trying to change our child into something else, we will have more connection with them and in turn a better chance of educating and helping them through harder times.

At the end of the day, you are a parent and you will have elements of friendship with your child too, especially as they age, but your goals and your behaviours ultimately have to differ. Your child's development depends on it.

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Section 5: Common Issues – Connections

In this final week we will re-examine how connection is crucial when we are looking at some of our common issues. It may be in how we handle these moments and it may be how we help avoid some of these moments, but there are ways that connection affects or is a part of all of these issues. As always, I am happy to discuss these issues in office hours to help you find ways to encourage connection with your child.

| Issue | How Connection Plays a Role |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Physical Aggression | <p>Often our kids lash out when they are overwhelmed and cannot regulate. In this case, physical connection can help calm the system in the moment and help restore behaviour.</p> <p>There is also the case where kids regularly act out because they may not like themselves or feel that they have no control at home. In these cases, you will need to take special note and work to build up that emotional connection with them and see where perhaps some methods have led to a misunderstanding or misinterpretation by the child and also how you can help them feel they have some control over their lives.</p> |
| Relational Aggression | <p>Relational aggression is about breaking connections at its heart and thus one of the key ways we can help avoid this is to actively work to build connections between people. If our children are regularly spending time connecting with others and learning about them, they are less likely to engage in relational aggression. If they are already behaving this way, taking time to forge connections through perspective-taking is central.</p> <p>There is also a chance that children who feel poorly about themselves will act out relationally instead of physically (girls are much more likely to do this). Like with physical aggression, it can also happen when kids feel they have no control at home so they are exerting control elsewhere. Connection and acceptance for who they are is essential to overcoming these behaviours.</p> |
| Disrespect/Speaking Out | <p>I cannot tell you how many times I have heard children say, “No one respects me!” when asked why they are being rude or disrespectful. Children model what they experience and if they feel someone does not accept or respect them, they are likely to respond in turn. If you connect with your child and speak lovingly, they will often do the same back.</p> <p>A special note here: I also have encountered times when children speak out because they have seen things on shows that they don’t quite understand. Often there are elements of sarcasm or rudeness that is displayed as humour in many children’s or pre-teen shows and our kids think this is okay. Having a discussion about this is a good idea if your child is regularly saying things that seem surprising for them.</p> |

Week 4: The Importance of Connection

| Issue | How Connection Plays a Role |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Tantrums | <p>Connection is the very first thing you need to do with a child who is in the midst of a tantrum. This looks first like empathizing with their situation which forms an emotional connection because you “get it”. As they calm they will likely need physical connection to help regulate. And then after, you will need to relate to them to be able to help them move forward.</p> <p>You also may need to be aware of how connection plays a role in preventing tantrums. If you have a child that is acting out regularly, there is a chance that their tank is empty and you need to fill that up to help them regulate better on a day-to-day basis.</p> |
| Obedience | <p>Strict obedience comes from a lack of connection because it is often stems from fear or internalized anxiety. Agreeing and seeing the value in what you ask comes from discussion and trust. If you have a child that blindly does what you ask, you may want to revisit your techniques and find out why before your child is old enough that they stop listening or their anxiety can cause bigger problems.</p> |
| Listening or Sitting Still | <p>Although there may be an issue with connection in causing listening problems, often it’s that the immediate connection isn’t there. That is, when you want to talk to your child or ask them to do something, you need to focus on your own behaviours. Are you looking at them? Are you on their level? Are you seeing that they are connected to you before you start? Often we yell from another room, talk while they are engaged, and then wonder why they aren’t listening.</p> <p>In addition, sometimes our kids need our physical connection to help them calm to sit still or listen. We can serve as the rock which helps anchor them, not through force, but through our calm presence.</p> |
| Homework | <p>When kids struggle with homework, they often need the presence of an adult there to help them through it and to empathize when they struggle. That physical connection and emotional understanding go a long way to helping kids through anything they find difficult.</p> |
| TV/Video Games | <p>It may be that a child’s obsession with screens is a substitute for connection and as such, making sure you have time with your child to help build up appropriate connections can help mitigate this need for screens. In other cases, it may be that you can use the screens to help connect with your child (yes!). I have heard many positive cases where parents engaged in video games or finding shows to watch that enabled a connection between the parent and child that then extended beyond the screens. Do not be afraid to use technology if you feel it will benefit your relationship with your child; just don’t leave it at only a technological connection.</p> |
| Remembering Things | <p>One of the biggest mistakes I think in helping kids learn about remembering this is a form of disconnection. When kids forget stuff, sometimes we take the stance that we won’t help them so they will learn; however, this just tells our kids that we aren’t there for them. It doesn’t help them learn to remember. Instead, taking the time to help (when possible) builds that connection and in turn, their desire to learn.</p> |

Week 4: The Importance of Connection

| Issue | How Connection Plays a Role |
|--------------------|--|
| Cleaning Up | We can use connection to help forge the habit of cleaning, as in using a ritual around cleaning time, or just doing it with your child as an activity that you both take part in. Doing things we don't like with people we love makes them that much easier. |
| Eating | Like cleaning, eating is something that is better done with people. Eating actually is a social activity and there is evidence that food tastes better when eaten with others! We can help forge positive relationships to healthy foods by taking the time to make meals and even snacks a social affair. |
| Sleeping | Co-sleeping is the biological norm for humans. Not just in infancy, but throughout our lifespan. We expect to sleep with our partners, and our children expect to sleep with – or at least close to – us. Whether it's cuddling your child to sleep at night or co-sleeping in the same room or bed, the connection of shared sleep can never be underestimated to our child's overall well-being (especially for more Orchid children). |
| Sharing | Connection is actually at the heart of sharing; the development of sharing follows a path by which kids start to share with family and friends first (i.e., people they know and like) and eventually learn to share certain things out of fairness. The key to building sharing behaviours is to help the child see connections between them and others. |

Thank you for taking part in this course! Your final homework this week is all about setting up time and ways to connect with the children in your life, whether it's at home or in the classroom. I look forward to helping you through office hours or email and I hope that you have enjoyed this course!