

Access

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Building Connection in Families

We've long said goodbye to June & Ward Cleaver from Leave it to Beaver. The images of family we are seeing in media today look quite different than they did in the 1960's. Today our diverse or 'different' families face some tough relationship challenges. Add to that the rising demands most parents and children have to contend with - careers, education, household duties, extra-curricular activities and financial or economic worries - and the problems in these relationships can become even more difficult.

There are nevertheless some common ways we can all relate to one another, no matter how hard it may seem. The answer can be summed up in one word - CONNECT! To connect literally means 'to join two or more things together.' Thus, connecting can only occur when there are two or more individuals. Happy families don't just happen. Simply stating we want to be physically fit doesn't make it happen. We need to also act on that goal. The same is true for creating a happy, connected family. Any time and energy put into connecting now will be rewarding.

Here are some helpful strategies to get you and your family connected:

1. Invest time in your child.

Seize the moment that you have - in the car or while grocery shopping. Find a way to both talk



and listen. WHY? Most people make a distinction between quality time and quantity time. To actually have quality time with a child, parents have to spend a lot of ordinary time with them. This time develops trust and truly helps you to understand their ways. Children need both high-quality and high-quantity time.

2. Spend 15 minutes of 1:1 time playing with your child each day.

If not every day, set a goal of how many times a week you can do this but always keep your word when you agree to spend time together. If you have a teen, play a sport or do an activity of their choosing that they enjoy. If you have more than 1 child, give the other a separate activity to do during that time and let them know they will have

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‘special’ time with you as well. Refrain from being the parent during this time by avoiding any discipline or conversation about problems. WHY? Playing with your child increases their self-confidence, no matter what their age. It also offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their child. It can serve as protection, both for the parents and child, against the negative effects of pressure and stress.

3. Create rituals.

Eat dinner together nightly, or have Wednesday game nights, hold weekly family meetings, or introduce a unique tradition. Shut off any distractions like TV or cell phones. For example, start the Rose, Thorn and Bud daily reflection activity. It works like this: Begin by asking your child to reflect on their day. First, ask them ‘What was the rose of your day?’ (the best part of their day), then ‘What was the thorn of your day?’ (the worst), and finally ‘What’s the bud of your day?’ (something they are looking forward to, either later that day or tomorrow). WHY? All of this fosters togetherness. It can be a fun time where you laugh and learn more about one another. It can also provide each family member an opportunity to speak or get help in trying to solve a problem. Kids learn to recognize that there are lessons even in mistakes or bad things that happen. This helps teach them resilience, or the ability to withstand stress, through the discovery that there is always a positive, even when there may have been a day full of thorns.

4. Tell (and often remind) your child what is unique about them, as well as what you appreciate.

WHY? Every family is filled with individuals who are, though related, very different from each other. Each child cannot be raised and related to in the very same way. Instead, let them know they are truly one of a kind. This will not only help strengthen your relationship with your child, but will also help their self-esteem.

5. Try to use the 5:1 ratio.

Give 5 compliments or positive words of praise to

your child for every negative comment. Be descriptive and specific in your praise. Praise who they are and their effort, not just achievement. For example, ‘I know it was really hard last night putting in that extra time to study. Your efforts paid off and your 98% test proves it. You made a smart decision to make studying your priority,’ rather than using the more common ‘Good job!’ WHY? It helps your child develop a sense of pride, mastery and confidence. Also, research shows we remember the negatives more



strongly than positives, so it doesn’t hurt to try to even out the scale a bit.

6. Build your support system.

Use extended family members like grandparents, aunts/uncles, neighbors, teachers, friends, or other parents for support. WHY? It helps to know you are not alone. These relationships offer stress relief for parents and help in creating bonds that make kids feel more secure. Remember “it takes a village” to raise a child.

Regardless of your family arrangement, these strategies are universal. Commit to try a few of these suggestions and you will begin to see and feel the benefits, maybe even immediately. When you are feeling more connected with your family, you are also benefitting your physical and mental health, therefore enhancing your well-being and that of your children and family.