

## INSIGHTS

### Connecting with your kids



Most of us get a bit “judgey” when we see a parent staring at their screen rather than engaging with their kids at the park or the shops – or worse, in a restaurant. And if a parent publicly berates their child, it often sends shivers down our spine.

Even though we are almost all guilty of it from time to time, it’s like there’s some intrinsic mechanism inside us that loads up on guilt each time we see a parent do something that impacts or severs the connection that they share with their child. We know it’s a concern and we draw back from it – and then we remember we do it sometimes too, and the parent guilt sets in.

I think it’s because connection is not a luxury item. It’s an essential: for your relationship, for your child’s wellbeing, and for their future.

#### What does a positive connection between parent and child look like?

Life Education Learning Manager, Lisa Woodward, says that positive connections are all about love, caring, nurturing, and safety. “In a positive parent-child relationship, family members feel safe and connected to one another.”

“It’s also about being in the moment with your child”, adds Derek McCormack, Director of the Raising Children Network. “It’s in a day-to-day setting, having quality time with your child whenever you can. Spotting the opportunities and making the time is really important.”

And from my perspective? We run our economy on dollars, and we run our relationships on connection. If there’s no dollars in the bank, we’re financially kaput. If there’s no connection in the relationship, we’re relationally broke.

#### There are great benefits

The benefits of positive connections between parent and child are significant and wide ranging says Woodward.

“Children learn and thrive when they have strong, loving and positive relationships with their parents and carers, and it’s the foundation for a child’s development physically, emotionally, and socially.”

Connection also helps develop important skills needed for a child’s future. “Strong relationships set the child up for success in their lives, they are more confident and resilient, better able to regulate their emotions, make friends and connections with others, and do better at school.”

#### Connections will change over time

As your child develops, your relationship with them will too. This is normal. “For example, your pre-teen might no longer want you around at the park with their friends, even though your child used to love playing there with you. This doesn’t mean that the connection is not still healthy and positive,” explains Woodward.

# parenting \* ideas

McCormack says one of the key principles of a positive connection is communication.

When your child is younger the opportunities for communication are really there any time you want but as a child grows you will need to look out for them more actively and make time for them.

“As your child becomes a teen, communication can be more of a one-way street and involve tuning into feelings and being a support for them,” he explains.

## How to achieve positive connections

“Positive connections are based on time together, being present, and building trust and respect”, says Woodward. For example:

### Make moments together matter

Booking in “quality time” doesn’t guarantee positive, bonding time. We may have the best intentions but sometimes these special times will not work out the way we had intended. Often the best conversations happen in the car, at bedtime, or when doing things side by side, like washing up or walking the dog. These moments give you the chance to communicate positive messages with smiles, laughter, eye contact, hugs and gentle touches.

### Tune in to your child

Tuning in to your child and thinking about what’s going on for them shows them that you care about the things that matter to them, which is the basis for a strong relationship. This could be noticing what your child is doing and commenting or encouraging them. For example, with younger children it might be talking about the Lego creation they are building, or the picture they are drawing.

### Nurture trust and respect in your relationships

Be available when your child needs support, care, or help. For example: giving them a hug when they fall over. Stick to your promises. If you’ve agreed to help them with a school assignment, make sure you follow through.

Value your child and their opinions. This could be showing interest in the things that interest them. Or listening without judgement when they express an opinion different to yours.

### Label emotions and listen

Let’s say you notice your child seems upset, instead of saying – “Are you ok?”, try something like “I notice you seem a bit down – do you want to talk? Or maybe we could just hang out for a while and watch a show together.”

## In closing

To a child, love is spelled t-i-m-e. That connection helps on a personal level but also by teaching key skills such as communication and resilience.

It’s important to remember that the connection will change and evolve as children do. But at the heart of it all is communication and that your child feels safe, secure and respected.



### Dr Justin Coulson

Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel 9’s Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia’s #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families podcast. He has written 6 books about families and parenting. For further details visit [www.happyfamilies.com.au](http://www.happyfamilies.com.au).