

Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids Online Course

Week 3: Connection

Transcript

Hello, and welcome to Week 3 of the Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids online course! I'm so glad you're here today because we're going to talk about one of my favorite topics: Connection. The reason I'm so excited about talking with you about connection is that it's like handing you a magic wand. It really is. Parents say to me all the time, "But if I don't punish, if I don't threaten, if I don't bribe, how will I get my child to cooperate?" The answer: Connection.

Children want to follow us if we are connected to them and they feel connected to us. It's not just how we feel – of course, we love them! – it's how *they* feel. Have they given us their whole heart? If they have, they'll follow us.

But if they feel misunderstood, if they feel resentful, if they simply have a lot of big emotions that they're in turmoil with and they're scared and they can't talk to us about them and they can't show them to us, then that puts a wedge between us, and they feel lonely and they can't give us their hearts.

Connection is a magic wand for us as parents because it turns everything with our child around. It transforms the relationship. It transforms our child's behavior. But it doesn't just do that for the child; it also does it for us. When we truly connect, we forget about teaching lessons; instead we focus on understanding and loving, and you know the miracle here? That changes how we relate. Our child turns around and gives us his or her heart, and changes their behavior, and wants to learn those lessons we're teaching.

Don't worry so much about teaching your child that important lesson. If you feel an urgent need to teach a lesson, it's because you're in fight, flight, or freeze. Just drop it. You can teach later because it's not a teachable moment when you're in fight, flight, or freeze. And if *they* are in flight, flight or freeze? Forget it. It's not a learnable moment.

Once your child is better connected to you, your child will want to learn the lessons that you want to teach. That's why I say that parenting is 80% connection. It's only 20% guidance, because until they feel the connection with us, children cannot follow our guidance.

Today is where the secrets are revealed. It's about connection – all of it. Of course, connection is not always easy. You can't connect until you can regulate yourself and make things safe for your child. That's why we focus first on your own self-regulation. But once you're self-regulating, reach for your magic wand. Forget about the lessons you want to teach, and go for connection. Try to understand your child.

If you do that, you don't have to be perfect. Just start doing it. Start empathizing. Start understanding. Start seeing things from your child's point of view. You'll find that your heart softens as you do this, and your child's heart will soften.

You'll probably see some anger initially as your child tries to fend off all of those big tears and fears that have been stuffed away, but now that your child feels safe, they're going to come out. Allow that. Love your child through it. He is emptying his backpack, and you will see that after that upset, he'll be in your arms, hugging you, and you'll see a whole different way of relating to you, and so much more interest in cooperating instead of getting into power struggles.

But I think I'm getting ahead of myself here because I'm so excited about this magic wand I'm handing you. I think we have a few questions to answer first, before we can get into the specifics of behavior.

What is connection, especially in the context of connecting with your child? Why is it so important? Why do we make such a big deal of it? Finally, what can you do to connect with your child and to stay connected on a daily and ongoing basis, given just how busy life is all of us all the time these days?

What is connection? The dictionary defines connection as "a relationship in which two things are joined to each other." They connect. I think of connection with our children as us being touched by our relationship with them, coming into close enough proximity, either with our bodies or our hearts, where we're touched and they're touched.

Often we take our daily connections for granted, especially with the people we live with who are there every morning and can get on our nerves. But that touch, being touched in our hearts, is an important part of what makes life worth living for all of us.

Most people on their deathbeds say that their real regret is that they didn't get closer to the people in their lives. Research consistently confirms that all of us find, in the end, that what mattered most to us were our human relationships and that what kept us happy, what kept us feeling like life was worth living, were our human relationships.

Of course, human relationships are not easy. Every relationship has conflict because, in every relationship, there's an I and a thou – two different people who are autonomous human beings with different needs and different feelings and different reactions to things.

Learning to navigate that relationship, learning how I can be me in a relationship with you, how I can allow you to be you, how I can appreciate you, love you, and encourage you at the same time that I'm hoping to get my own needs met in the relationship with you through our connection and the unfolding of our relating to each other, that's a complex thing for anyone to learn.

How does anyone ever learn such a thing? It starts in babyhood, which matters tremendously. It matters so that we can be loving people later in life, so that we can feel fulfilled by the relationships we have, so that we can draw to us people who are more likely to actually love and appreciate us, so that we can be considerate of other people and empathic to them, rather than just self-centered, but also so that we can understand our own needs and get them met rather than just being self-sacrificing all the time and just giving to other people and not tending to ourselves.

Your connection with your child is how your child learns intimacy, how your child learns what relationships are all about. Those early life relationships, what we call early attachment relationships, are what teach children about human dynamics.

But there's something else that happens in those early attachment relationships. Our brain takes shape. Human babies are born with a brain that's fairly undeveloped because that gives it the most chance of adapting to the baby's unique environment. So as the baby interacts with his early environment, his brain wires based on his experience, and any repeated experience lays down repeated wiring, which reinforces those neural connections.

Now, the environment for a baby is the people that baby interacts with on a daily basis, so as we interact with our baby, as we connect, as we build a relationship with our child, we're also helping our child build his brain.

One important part of the brain that's being built is emotional self-regulation. We don't learn to regulate our emotions in isolation from other people; we actually learn from being connected to someone else. When our parent picks us up and soothes us, we feel that soothing emotionally, but also, physically. The body releases soothing neurochemicals and reduces the stress hormones that the body is circulating. The baby's physiology is being built based on the interaction with the parents.

This process of the child developing his or her brain and physiology in relationship to the parent doesn't end in babyhood. The brain is most plastic in the first year, obviously, but as a toddler, when the child is swept by big emotions, the child's pre-frontal cortex, the reasoning part of the brain, is beginning to emerge and take shape, depending on the interactions with the parent.

Let's say a toddler gets very upset. Well, the child is coming out of a lower part of the brain – let's say the brain stem, the lizard part of the brain, or maybe just the mammalian part of the brain, the limbic system, the emotional part of the brain that all mammals share. The child is not coming from their more highly developed pre-frontal cortex, because guess what? They don't have one yet when they're two! They're just beginning to develop it.

When the child acts like a small mammal or a lizard, the parent's job is to stay calm and to shift out of their own lizard brain, which is coming out to be the bigger, badder lizard and keep their child in line. It's the parent's job even to shift out even of the limbic system, which is saying, "Emergency! Emergency! Something terrible is coming!"

Instead, the parent's job is to move into the pre-frontal cortex, the grown-up, reasoning part of the brain that says, "Well, I wish this kid wouldn't have a tantrum right now, but you know what? We'll deal. It's really okay. And it's my job to act like the grown-up."

Then the parent can connect with the child, and that's like throwing the child a lifeline. The child uses that, not only to self-regulate but to build a healthier brain that allows the child to self-regulate when things feel like an emergency, not just in childhood but for the rest of their lives.

That wouldn't be happening if the child weren't connected to us. The child trusts us. The child is connected. They know we have their best interests at heart, so they follow our lead. Connection is what shapes the brain. The child develops the pre-frontal cortex and the ability to regulate directly from their connection with an adult who is able to self-regulate.

Now, you may be wondering, "Oh, no! Have I ruined my child with my own parental tantrums?" You can have tantrums once in a while. That's okay; it won't ruin your child. But the more often you have them, the more of an impediment it is to your child's emotional growth, and your child's brain development, quite frankly. That's why we focus so much on self-regulation.

But now let's go back to connection. You can see why connection is so important. First, it reaches the child about relationships, about how to love. Second, it wires the child's brain and teaches the child how to regulate emotionally. Third, connection is the beginning of your child's self-esteem.

We're going to talk in our week on mastery about how children develop self-esteem. Certainly, it does not come from being told that they are loved. It comes from two places. One: experiencing themselves as competent, efficacious, able to get what they want in life, and having the power to realize their own dreams. That's an important part of self-esteem.

But there's another part of self-esteem. For a child to become that person who can regulate himself and his impatience and his frustration in order to overcome the inevitable obstacles of life so that he can accomplish whatever he wants, for a child to be that person, he has to believe he is worthwhile.

And there's another part of it. Even when a child accomplishes great things in life, if she doesn't believe she is worthwhile, she will never feel good about herself, no matter what she

accomplishes. We all know people who've accomplished great things and still feel inside like they're a fraud. So part of connection that really matters is delighting in your child.

All of us get really busy and we just put our kids through the schedule. We fight with them about getting dressed in the morning or whether they're going to eat healthy food, and we forget that what matters is the positive interactions, that when our child decides unconsciously whether they're lovable, they're going to ask themselves, Are they someone who their mom and dad delight in? When parents delight in a child, that child feels worthwhile.

The foundation of self-esteem isn't what we can accomplish, and it isn't what we're told about being good enough or being lovable or loved. It's how we *feel*. Do we feel lovable? You can't fake love. When a child feels loved, they conclude that they're lovable. That's connection. Connection or love is what teaches a child that she is worth loving, worth someone noticing and delighting in.

When a child is loved and connected with, they feel like it's okay for them to be here, taking up space on the planet. They don't even have to do anything to be loved; they're more than enough, just as they are. That's self-love. Our connection to our child is what creates our child's self-esteem, but we're really talking about self-love.

You can see why connecting with your child is really critical to your child's development, but let me suggest that it's also critical to you as a parent. Connection is what restores the joy to parenting. If connection with your child is where your child feels delighted in and that makes such a big difference to your child, you're feeling delighted with your child at that moment. So that "delighting in" connection brings a warm feeling, not just to your child's heart but also to yours.

Parenting is hard. There are so many sacrifices, all day, every day, and the connection with your child is what makes those sacrifices worth it. There's a trope in popular culture, at least in the United States, about how parenting is all work and no fun, and here we thought parenting would make us happy.

Well, it's true. Parenting is really hard for all the reasons we talk about in this course – like you have to regulate yourself – and reasons we don't get into too much in this course, like there's very little social support. Also, many of us – and this is about connection – are trying to parent almost in our spare time because we have so much else to do.

Parenting is hard, but there is something that makes parenting 100% easier, and that's connection. When I see these articles about how hard parenting is and how we're doing something wrong to expect so much of ourselves, of course, we have to ease up on ourselves.

But there is something that those reporters don't seem to know, that most of us don't know, which is that when we delight in our child, it puts the joy back into parenting. So connection is not just for your child; connection is also for you.

Often we think, "Oh, gosh. Now I have to go play with my kid," or "I just want her to get in the bathtub. I don't want to have to jolly her around and get her laughing." I have felt the same way, but it's like anything else in life; if we're enjoying ourselves, the time goes quickly, and if we're not fully present, not connecting, we're resisting the moment, and that moment feels interminable, even if it's just a couple of minutes of playing Barbie or trains or whatever.

What's more, our child feels our resistance. Kids pick it up and either they take it as more evidence that they're not really lovable—even if they can't articulate that to you—or they act out to get your attention. They misbehave more, or at the end of the time you've spent playing with you, they are so sad to lose you again because they didn't feel they really got you when they were playing with you, so they throw a complete tantrum, even though you just spent "quality time" together.

That brings us to the practical value of connection. Children need to feel connected to us or they will not cooperate with us. They simply won't follow our lead. To understand why that is, think about how you respond when someone tells you what to do. Do you resist? Most of us get our hackles up and think, "Don't you boss me around."

Well, kids are no different, and there's a good reason for that. If children routinely did what people told them to do when it wasn't in the child's best interest, bad things would happen to that child. In fact, kids like that probably did not live to pass on their genes to us. Children, like other humans, are not designed to automatically obey what someone tells them to do.

Yet, of course, children need guidance from someone they trust. If children didn't get that guidance, they would not survive and make it to adulthood. So, who can they trust? How are we programmed as children to make the decision about whose lead to follow?

Well, babies are born looking for attachment, looking for relationships. We develop in the context of relationships, as we've already discussed. So, when does a child trust an adult? When they think that adult has their back, when they think that adult is in their corner.

That doesn't mean that you have to give your child everything they want; it means that your child has to trust you and feel that he or she can rely on you to be there when they need you. In other words, when they're upset, will you understand?

If you want your child to give you his or her heart and follow your lead, you want your child to say, "I don't always get what I want, but I get something better. I get a mom or dad who always

understands, and who loves me no matter what, complete with all my yucky, inconvenient emotions.”

Our children are willing to take guidance from us because of who we are to them. It’s not just the physical caretaking; it’s also who we are to them emotionally. They have a relationship with us. They are connected with us. They’re designed to be influenced by us.

When you think about it, this is true for adults, as well. There’s research that people of different political persuasions are never able to convince each other with statistics and data and research studies; however, if they end up for some reason in a relationship, like they’re neighbors or in the same church, and they talk about their different political perspectives, they begin to touch each other emotionally, and they’re more likely to open to the other person’s point of view. Really, the only influence we have with our children – or with anyone else – comes from the relationship.

Now, it’s certainly true that we can force someone to behave as we’d like them to – adults or children – by using power over them, but I’m talking about influencing their hearts and minds; for instance, to help a child *WANT* to cooperate with us. That influence only ever comes from our relationship with the child.

The more you try to control another human being, the more that human being resists, digs in their heels, and says, “I’m not sure if I’m going with you. I’m not going to follow your lead.” But the more connected we are with another human being, the more influence we have with them.

Children are designed brilliantly so that they will follow the parents’ lead. They’re born looking for attachment, for connection, for someone who will protect them, nurture them, feed them, tell them about life. You remain for many years your child’s leader.

Gordon Neufeld, who wrote the wonderful book *Hold On To Your Kids*, calls it being your child’s North Star. Your child revolves around you, and your child looks to you figure out his place in the world. You’re his primary source of information about the world and also about himself for many, many years.

Even when children begin to look to the outside world, begin to look to their peer group, to teach them information about the world and about themselves, you remain very important in, first of all, the kinds of peers your child picks, because your child will pick peers who remind him of his relationships at home, his first relationships.

Also, if there’s a conflict in the information, if there’s some cognitive dissonance where your child... Let’s say that someone tells your daughter that she’s not beautiful; in fact, they tell her she’s ugly. But through growing up in your home, she has learned to think of herself as someone

in whom her parents take delight, and her parents find her beautiful inside and out. So she's going to feel beautiful, no matter what the world tells her.

When there's a discrepancy between what the world says and what you've said, your child places a very high value on your information that you've imparted over the years through your emotional connection, because learning depends on emotion and on connection. Your child has learned about who she is in the context of her relationship with you. That's who she feels she is, and that's who she is going to act like now, when she goes out into the world.

Let's talk about those early relationships, and then we'll come to the present day, because your child is probably not an infant at this moment.

What matters most in early relationships? Well, everybody is different, right? So what matters is that we as parents respond to our child's needs, whatever need they're expressing, because it might be different with different children.

If you have a child with sensory processing issues, his needs might not include being held a lot because that might really over-stimulate him. If you have a child who really needs to be held constantly, she is going to let you know that. Being a responsive parent means you will pick her up, you will hold her, you will wear her. You might well keep her close to your body as much as possible when she is little.

One need we know that all children have is to feel safe. They're tiny. It's a big world. They count on us to help them feel safe. They also want to be autonomous. They want to develop their own ability to engage with the world, to reach that rattle, to shake that rattle, to throw that rattle. At the same time, they want to be safe. If the rattle falls on their face while they're lying on their back shaking the rattle, that's scary.

How can they be themselves and engage with the world but at the same time feel safe? They depend on their parents for that. One of our most important jobs is to help our children feel safe. Just the presence of a parent can make all the difference in the world to a child is feeling anxious or worried about something.

We all do this automatically. For instance, if a dog is slobbering over the baby and the baby begins to cry, we move the dog away, or we move the baby away. We speak soothingly. We help the child learn that even though scary things can happen in the world, the child has backup that she can trust, and she will be safe.

Children build on the secure, safe foundation that our connection with them provides. When they feel safe, then they can attend to exploring the world and meeting the developmental challenges of growing up. Your child's sense of safety in the world that allows him to become more

independent and autonomous comes directly from his connection with you. When people talk about secure attachment, that's what they mean.

Now, I've noticed that a lot of parents get worried when we talk about secure attachment. "What does that mean? I didn't wear my baby. I didn't co-sleep. I wasn't able to nurse. Does that mean my child won't be securely attached?" Absolutely not.

There's a lot of confusion about secure attachment, so let me just briefly explain what it is. All secure attachment means is that your child feels that you respond to her needs as she expresses them, and you will keep her safe in the world, and you will accept her feelings, and you'll reassure her when she needs it. That's secure attachment.

It has nothing to do with attachment parenting per se. Attachment parenting was developed by Dr. Sears and has been popularized in recent years and does include three practices that we think of as very associated with it: co-sleeping, nursing the baby, and wearing the baby. However, it's just designed to keep the baby close so that you can be responsive to the baby's cues. The attachment practices that are part of what we think of as attachment parenting are simply designed to make you a more responsive parent.

If, for whatever reason, you did not use those parenting practices with your child, it does not mean you're not a responsive parent. You know, we don't have a lot of research on attachment parenting. It does look like parents who wear their babies are more responsive to the baby's cues. Well, that would make sense. The baby is closer to you, so you're noticing more of what the baby is trying to tell you.

But even before these practices were commonly used in the United States, about 60% of kids in the United States were securely attached. It may not seem like a very high percentage to you – 60%. That means that almost half of all kids were not securely attached. But it does mean that those practices that we think of as attachment parenting practices are not strictly necessary to raise a child who's securely attached.

Since we know the psychology of this, we know that the practices are not what matter most; what matters most is a parent who responds. It's called a contingent response. Your response depends on what the child is initiating with you, what the child is asking for. This is true when you have a baby and you respond to your baby, and it's also true when you have an eight-year-old and you respond to your eight-year-old with empathy.

The chapter that you're reading for homework this week on Connection, in *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids*, has a lot of info on attachment, and if you are interested in attachment, there is a

whole section on attachment on the Aha! Parenting website. In my graduate studies, I did a lot of work in attachment. That's what my dissertation is on, and I love to talk about it.

But this audio is for connection really for older kids, so we're not going to spend any more time on attachment. Just know that regardless of what you did when your child was a baby, the brain is very plastic and your child is always revising his view of the world based on his new experiences. So it doesn't matter; even if your child had an insecure attachment, even if you have an insecure attachment, you can change that now so that you can connect more deeply with your child.

Here's the last thing you need to know about attachment. When kids have not felt their needs were met, they usually respond in one of two ways. They either become avoidant and they shut down their needs and they resist expressing them, or they become what we call ambivalent or resistant, and they try very hard to get you to connect with them. They're clingy and a little angry because they feel like their needs are not being met. They have a little chip on their shoulder about whether their needs will be met.

You might notice that you yourself fit one of those descriptions, or your partner does. You might also notice that your child fits one of these descriptions. If you fit one of these descriptions, it will influence how you relate to your child, how open you are about your own emotions, and how receptive you are when your child is needy.

Our own strategies that we have developed to feel safe emotionally, that we developed in our early childhoods, do come into play as we connect with our child. If you notice that you're the kind of person who dismisses emotion – if your child is crying and big feelings make you feel uncomfortable, if you just want them to get over it already – then you might do some work on yourself to notice where you don't feel safe letting yourself feel your emotions.

If you're the kind of person who's a little clingy with other people, and a little needy, and really wants reassurance all the time that you're good enough the way you are, you might notice how your own need for affirmation from other people keeps you from standing on your own two feet. You might remind yourself that, actually, you can tolerate the anxiety of not having someone constantly reassure you.

When you're willing to sit a little bit with your own anxiety, you'll notice you're not quite so quick to jump in with your child. When he cries because his toy broke, you'll be able to really allow him to have those feelings rather than trying to get him to stop crying by promising a new toy or distracting him.

Really, it's a question of can you be comfortable with your own emotions? If you can be, you'll be comfortable with your child's emotions, and you'll be able to respond to them appropriately, which is what will help your child develop a secure attachment and therefore a foundation of security so that she can go out into the world and rise to meet the normal developmental challenges of growing up.

Your takeaway on attachment security is simply to notice the way that you cope with emotion and therefore how that affects the way you handle your child's emotions. If your own emotions make you so uncomfortable that you shut them down, you're going to shut down your child's emotions, as well. If your own emotions make you so anxious that your child's emotions make you anxious, again, you can't respond to your child by accepting her emotions when she gets upset, and that undermines your connection with your child.

I want to tell you a quick story about a discovery at the Gottman "Love Lab" in Seattle, where John and Julie Gottman have been studying families for 30 years. One of the things they do is ask couples to fight in front of a one-way mirror, and then they ask them to calm down and have a different discussion about something else.

They noticed that some of these couples could not calm down. Others could, but sometimes one or both members of a couple were simply unable to let go of the conflict and move onto something else. And they noticed, unfortunately, that those people who couldn't calm themselves down were the ones who were most likely to get divorced. Makes perfect sense, right? They couldn't handle interpersonal conflict with their loved one.

But then they noticed something else. They had families who were with them for 30 years who they watched grow older and raise families. Sometimes those children got older and found a partner and would come into the "Love Lab" themselves and participate in the study. So they would be able to watch people who they had assessed as children, and they would be able to watch them with their partner.

They made a really interesting discovery: the people who could calm down and therefore whose relationships were a lot better and more likely to be satisfying and long-lasting, those people had been securely attached as toddlers.

Obviously, your relationship with your parents as a toddler is not the only thing that determines whether you have a good marriage later in life, but it actually has a big impact. People who are not securely attached as toddlers, who do not believe that their parents will be there for them emotionally, also have a hard time in their marriage because they have a hard time regulating their emotions.

Your connection with your child helps him to regulate his emotions. It will affect his ability to regulate his emotions and have connections with other people for the rest of his life.

So now let's talk about how you can build that wonderful, warm connection that's going to help you restore the sweetness to parenting and help your child want to cooperate with you, develop high self-esteem, wire a really emotionally intelligent brain, and learn how to love.

How can you build that wonderful, warm connection? You might even have more than one child. Regardless of how many children you have, you're trying so hard just to get through the day and keep the kids on track and get dinner on the table and get the kids into the bath and into bed. How can you possibly build the connection you want with your child?

I think the answer is that we can't assume that we will just happen into those nice, warm interactions. We actually have to do some work to make them happen.

Now, as we orient ourselves a little differently, you'll find that the interactions happen more frequently because of where you are and what you're bringing to your day as you go through the day with your child. Meaning if you're in a more empathic frame of mind, if you're more centered, and if you're taking care of yourself, you'll be more emotionally generous, you'll be more able to connect. Whereas if you're feeling completely overwhelmed, and you just can't bear somebody tugging on you yet again, saying, "Mommy! Daddy!" then naturally you're going to respond by shutting down connection.

So part of this is about you taking care of yourself. We will get to that in future weeks, but it's worth just noticing even now, as you go through your day, whether you're encouraging connection or whether you're shutting it down, and why that might be.

The best way to build connection into your day is to make it part of your routine. The way to think about this is probably to build it around separation. Any time you're about to separate from your child or you're reunited, then you would find an opportunity to connect.

Larry Cohen, the author of *Playful Parenting*, once said, "Parents have to be experts at reconnection." I think that's right. I emphasize connection, but really no one stays connected all the time, and it wouldn't be good for your child. They need to break away from their connection from you to have moments of autonomy, where they're engaging with the world without you there in the middle, between them and the world, so that they can gain more and more confidence engaging with the world.

Even as a baby, there will be times when your child wants to play by himself, and shakes the rattle, drops the rattle, reaches for it and reaches for it, and finally rolls over to get it, where you

are not going to intervene to help because that's how he is developing autonomy and mastery. He is reaching out into the world to accomplish his own goal.

Of course, if he asks you for help and you encourage him, and he still can't do it and starts to get upset, of course, you help. But children do need to have breaks in their connection with us in order to develop autonomy.

We're constantly reconnecting with them after separation, and often that separation is physical if they go to school or daycare, or even if they go to bed at night in a room separate from yours or a bed separate from yours. When you're reunited in the morning, they experience that as having been a separation, so you need to have a little reconnection ritual and snuggle with them.

Any time there's a disconnection in the course of your day – which is a healthy thing to have – then you want a reconnection. So set up some rituals. When you wake up in the morning, snuggle with each child – if possible, one by one; if necessary, in a group. Just make sure they all feel like they get your complete attention during some part of that ritual so that they reconnect with you.

Then when you drop them off at school, use the power of ritual. Have a little goodbye rhyme. “I love you. You love me. Have a great day and I'll pick you up at three.” Whatever your little ritual is, there is extra power to rituals. They go deeper than the conscious mind into the unconscious, and when the same ritual happens every day, it helps the child to cope with the separation.

When you pick your child up, a hug is great, but you can even use a hello ritual. Becky Bailey has some wonderful reconnecting rituals in her book *I Love You Rituals*.

While we're on this subject of separations, I want to make a plea to take them more seriously. There's research that shows that, when partners hug each other hello and goodbye, their marriage is better, and a man who gets a goodbye hug from his wife when he leaves the house in the morning is much less likely to have a heart attack during the day.

Now, maybe that's just indicative of that man's relationship with his wife as better than somebody else's relationship, and a good relationship, we know, is protective against heart disease.

But since that's the case, a good relationship with your child will also be a protective factor for your child all day long. If you can give your child a hug every day when you part, that can go a long way toward helping your child feel that secure foundation all day long that will help him meet the challenges of his day.

I suggest that there should always be goodbye hugs in the morning or whenever you part, and that when you're reunited with your child, like when you pick them up towards the end of the day, even with an older child, even with a teenager, I would turn off the radio, put down your phone that you've just been texting on or whatever as you waited for your child – turn your phone off, in fact – and connect with your child. Instead of using technology on the ride home, use that opportunity to connect.

Now, if you have kids who fight all the time, technology can be a great thing in the car. They can take turns on the song, deciding what songs they want to play, and they can also sing together, which can create a nice feeling of bonding.

I'm not against using technology or music in the car; I'm just saying that, instead of taking it for granted that you've just been reunited with your child, remember that some people don't have a child to pick up today. They lost their child. Just remind yourself of that every day, and I think you go into the pickup with a whole different frame of mind of appreciating your unique child and wanting to connect, no matter how difficult your child may in fact be at pickup – and kids are often difficult at pickup.

But here's the thing. Once we reconnect, then we have a firm foundation with our child to help them have a better time with us through the rest of the day, the afternoon and the evening, that we have left together. When we don't do the work to reconnect after separation, those are the days that usually turn into nightmares.

The reason for this is that we haven't emotionally "collected" our child. That term again comes from Gordon Neufeld, who wrote the wonderful book *Hold On To Your Kids*. We need to *emotionally* "recollect" our child after we've been physically apart, as well.

In addition to actual separations, consider that when your focus been elsewhere, your child has felt a separation. Even if you've been home with your child all day, if you've been feeding the baby, or if you've been cooking dinner, and your focus has been elsewhere, or your child has been engaged with electronic media, which takes him out of the present moment of your home, where he feels connected to you, that's a separation. So any time your focus or your child's focus has been elsewhere – after that, just find a way to reconnect. Now, this does not have to be a big thing, but simply a hug, "How are you doing, sweetheart? Oh, look at your beautiful face. I am so lucky to be your mom."

One great example of a time that we don't even experience as a separation but our child does, is when we're on the phone. You've probably noticed that as soon as you get on the telephone, your child begins to act out. He gives his sister a hard time, he is suddenly climbing on things he shouldn't, or he is getting out the iPad, or he is simply whining in your ear while you're trying to

talk to the pediatrician or making a work call, and he – your son – just needs your attention right this minute.

Why is that? What happens to children? What happens is they're genetically, biologically programmed to make sure they stay safe. That's how the human race is still here. That means that if your attention is diverted from him, then he worries. "What if a tiger jumps out of the bushes?" He is tiger meat if you're not paying attention.

Of course, there's no tiger in your house, but his genes don't understand that. His genes are still derived from millennia ago, when there could have been a tiger. So the minute our attention is elsewhere, children do experience it as a separation and they don't feel safe.

It's just a good example of a time when we need to prepare our children for the separation by getting them started on doing something that will engross them so that they don't really register that our attention is now elsewhere, and they're untethered to the world, and, oh no, they could be prey for tigers.

Before you do a separation from your child – for instance, to get on the phone or to go check something on your computer – make sure that you have a nice connection with your child. Get him started with something, reassure him that you'll be right back. Then he'll separate from you pretty easily, and of course you will go back and reconnect once you get off the phone.

As you go through your day with your child, just find ways to connect. Seek him out for a hug and a smile, or take him to the window to look at the fireflies together out the window at dusk. As you're going through the routine together of every day, just find a way to connect during each part of the routine.

If he is in the bathtub and really enjoying playing with his boats and he doesn't seem to really be looking for connection, that's totally fine. But at some point during his bath, make a point of connecting warmly. Then you'll find that when it's time to get out of the bath, he is a lot more cooperative.

One really useful finding from the Gottman "Love Lab" is that for every negative interaction that we have with another person, we need to have at least five positive interactions in order to restore the relationship to a positive valence, a positive overall feeling.

So, naturally, when you have hard times with your child, you especially need to find ways to connect. Since there are hard times every single day – times when you'll find yourself needing to say no to your child, for instance – it becomes all the more important that we find positive ways to connect with each child on a daily basis.

Make a list of ways to connect with your child. Put it up where you're going to see it, and do one thing, at least, each day with each child.

You can see how useful routines are in ensuring that you stay connected with your child and that you reconnect after separations, but there's another kind of reconnection that parents have to become experts at, and that's repair of relationship ruptures. Saying "no" to your child is a tiny relationship rupture. At least hopefully it's tiny. Sometimes it's a big one if it comes on the heels of other disappointments for your child, or if they have a big backpack full of emotions that are ready to spill out and your "no" was the straw that broke the camel's back.

When things get tense at your house, when your child gets very emotional, gets upset, gets angry, that's a relationship rupture. We have relationship ruptures in every relationship from time to time, and they need to be repaired.

Let's give you some power tools that you can use to repair a connection when it gets a little frayed. My three favorite power tools are:

1. Soothing
2. Empathy
3. Laughter.

Soothing is something you automatically do since you're a parent. When your child is scared, you know that you can reassure them, and you probably automatically use your connection with your child to help them feel safe.

You may not realize that when your child is angry, often under the anger is fear. So when your child balks at something or gets defiant, stop, take a deep breath, reconnect in a soothing way, and you'll often see that your child will calm down, because what's behind his anger is actually anxiety. He is scared to go forward to do whatever you're asking him to do, which might be something like washing his hair, or going to school, or whatever it is he is being defiant about.

Once you soothe him, he's able to reconnect with you, and he's able to actually hear what you have to say, listen to reason, calm down, and cooperate better. So when there's a relationship rupture and you're trying to reestablish connection, the first thing to do is to create safety for your child.

Your second power tool, and one that works to create safety, as well as to create connection in any circumstance, is empathy. Now, empathy is a complicated topic; we could do a whole course just on empathy. But I suggest that you think of it for this purpose as helping your child feel understood, because that automatically creates connection. When we feel understood, we're

connected to the person who understands us. So no matter what your child expresses, you empathize. You don't have to agree with it. Empathy is not agreement; it's understanding.

Your daughter may be very angry at her little sister, and you may not really agree with her. It's just not true that the little sister always gets her way. In fact, you may believe the older sister usually gets her way. It doesn't matter. When you empathize with your daughter, you're not agreeing with her perspective, her opinion; you're saying, "You feel like it's not fair, huh? You like being the only one who had a blue nightgown, and now your sister has a blue nightgown, too. It made you special to have a blue nightgown, and you don't like it that she has one. I hear you."

Just understanding helps you reconnect with your daughter so that you have more influence with her. Then maybe she can hear you when you say to her that she is special to you no matter what nightgown she wears and no matter if every girl in the world had a blue nightgown, you would be able to pick her out of crowd because she is your Amelia, your one and only Amelia, and there's a very special place for her in your heart, no matter what. That's what she really needs to know.

But she is not open to hearing that from you, she is not open to your influence at all while she is really upset, because when we're upset, we feel alone with our emotions. We feel all alone in the world, like no one could every possibly understand us. When you empathize with her, when you understand her perspective, then she feels reconnected.

Even if her sister still has a blue nightgown and she's still pretty unhappy about it, she doesn't feel so alone. What's more, because of that connection with you, she is now open to your influence, and she can think about what you have to say to her and really take it in and feel like, "Well, actually, maybe I am special, even if somebody else has a blue nightgown like mine."

Empathy is a power tool to connect with another person. It's also a power tool for your child to get past the emotions that are getting in her way because once you empathize and she feels understood, she doesn't have to hang onto those emotions. She doesn't have to hang onto her anger. She doesn't have to yell at her sister or yell at you so that you understand how upset she is. You already understand.

She can even begin to move past the emotion, because the magic thing about emotions is that once we get the message, once we feel what they're trying to tell us, they dissolve. That's because emotions are basically a message to us about something. We'll talk more about emotions next week.

Given how useful empathy is to us, why don't we use it more often? Why isn't it our 24/7 response to our children? Something seems to get in the way of us being able to offer our child empathy.

What gets in the way is usually our own agenda. We just want our kid to get ready for bed, and she's upset that her sister's new nightgown is the same color as hers, and she doesn't want to get her nightgown on. She wants a different nightgown. She is very upset, and we are just at the end of our rope. We've had a long day. We think she is being completely ridiculous, and we certainly don't want to encourage her in this, so we don't empathize. We say, "Don't be ridiculous. Put your nightgown on right now. No, there's not another clean nightgown."

I would like to encourage you to see empathy as the bridge to your child. At this moment, you think she is being ridiculous and you don't really want a bridge. So before you can use empathy, you have to stop, drop what you're doing, take a deep breath, go off in the bathroom by yourself, splash some water on your face, and remind yourself, "Let's have a nice bedtime. If I have a big fight with my daughter now, we're going to have a terrible bedtime. She is going to be really difficult, and I'm going to go to bed feeling terrible about how I yelled at her. Let's try something different tonight." Take a deep breath. Remind yourself that she is acting like a child because she *is* a child and that she is not trying to give you a hard time.

Bonnie Harris, who teaches connective parenting, says, "Your child is not trying to be a problem. Your child is *having* a problem." So your child is not giving you a hard time about the nightgown. She is not even giving her sister a hard time. She is *having* a hard time. This is a child who really needed to feel special, and somehow that nightgown got all wrapped up with her feelings of specialness because her dad told her it matched her blue eyes and she felt like that's what made her special in his eyes, let's just say.

So she is not giving you a hard time. So as you take a moment to yourself to calm down in the bathroom, remind yourself, "She is acting like a child because she *is* a child. She's having a hard time. I can connect with her. I can soothe her fear. I can maybe even address her fear directly, but I can certainly soothe her fear and empathize with her, and that will get us part of the way home. Then we'll see what happens."

So you go back in the other room, and just as we described a few minutes ago, you acknowledge how she is feeling. You give her a hug and you say, "You know what? That blue nightgown you have looks wonderful on you and brings out your blue eyes. But to me, it doesn't matter what nightgown you wear. You're beautiful no matter what, and your dad thinks so, too." Now you've soothed, and she may still have some fears, but she feels a whole lot better – and you have a chance of having a peaceful bedtime.

Another thing that gets in the way of empathizing is that we're afraid that it means that the child will no longer comply with what we're asking. "I know you hate to pick up your things, but every Saturday morning, we clean up your room together. That's what we need to go do right now."

You're not going to give on this. Your child still has to come with you and pick up her room. But now at least she feels connected to you, so she is much more likely to actually pitch in with you and forget about her resistance as you begin to sing a song and act silly as you work together to clean up the room.

Another reason we don't empathize is because we're angry. If we're having a conflict with our child, it's very hard to stop and see our child's point of view. We're upset ourselves. Empathizing when we're angry at somebody is really difficult to do; however, it is a great way to talk yourself down from the cliff of anger.

Let's say your three-year-old gets mad because his favorite crayon breaks. He is so mad he breaks every other crayon in the box! Now you're mad. Crayons cost money, for goodness sake. If you can remind yourself that he is acting like a three-year-old because he *is* a three-year old, you can calm down enough to say to him, "Wow! You must have been so mad your crayon broke. You were just so mad because that's your very favorite color crayon in the whole world, right? It made you so mad you wanted to break all the crayons. Is that what happened?" That creates connection again.

It doesn't mean that you're going to go buy all new crayons, and it doesn't mean that you think that was an okay way for him to handle his anger. But after all, he is only three. Your first job is to reconnect with him before you can do problem-solving or teaching of any kind.

Another reason we don't use empathy is that we simply don't have it. I started by asking you, "Why don't we just use empathy all the time, 24/7, as a response to whatever our children do, and wouldn't that be an amazing habit to develop?" But most of us didn't grow up with that experience, so it's hard to give that to our children. Most of us grew up with our parents saying things like, "Oh, don't be a baby," or "You don't need to be upset about that. Come on, get over it."

That doesn't mean that our parents didn't love us. Even very loving parents are scared by emotion and want kids to focus on problem-solving instead of wallowing in the emotion. Many of us are guilty of that, just as our parents were. So the habit of shutting down emotion, trying to talk kids out of what they feel, telling them they don't feel that or they shouldn't do that, for many of us has become almost automatic.

As you go through your day with your child, notice what your child expresses to you, and then notice how you respond. Then think about whether you could retrain yourself so that your first response is always to take a deep breath and calm yourself, so you're not coming from a place of upset. Then reconnect with your child by empathizing with them.

You can see how empathy is a powerful tool for reconnecting with your child after there have been big emotions, and that includes after your own big emotions. All parents sometimes find themselves saying exactly the wrong things, or they simply get so angry that they lose it, and then later, they feel terrible, and they want to reconnect with their child.

In those times when you feel bad about how you've acted, how do you reconnect? The answer is that you apologize. You remind yourself that you want to be good role model and that apologizing is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of strength.

You go to your child and say, "Sweetheart, I really yelled before, didn't I? I'm so sorry. You never deserve to be yelled at by anyone, no matter what. In our house, we try to find respectful ways to express what we need, and I didn't do a very good job of it then. So I'd like to do a do-over. But first, I want you to know that I'm really sorry, and I'm working hard to be respectful and responsible, even when I'm angry. We all get angry. It's okay to be angry. It's not okay to yell at other people."

Here's where the empathy comes in. You're not just apologizing; you're actually helping your child with the emotions that came up for your child when you got angry, because that would be hard for any child. Even when they act like it doesn't matter to them at all that you yelled, it does. It scares them.

Here you would say something like, "It must have been pretty scary when I yelled, huh?" If your child just shrugs, that's an admission that, yes, it's scary, but they don't want to admit it, or sometimes your child will angrily say, "I hate it when you act like that, Mommy," and you can again empathize. "I know you do, Sweetie. It must be scary." Older children will sometimes act like it doesn't bother them when you yell, but it always does, and the empathy always matters. Just acknowledging that it must have been hard for them when you yelled is an important part of your apology. Then of course you finish with a big hug.

It's an important thing that children get this experience because it teaches them that you can apologize, that you can repair a relationship that you have inadvertently damaged. And your child is human. Your child will damage relationships, too. So this is a really important thing to learn.

In fact, all of reconnection is about repairing rupture, repairing separation, reconnecting. You're role modeling for your child how to do this repair work, and it's a critical lesson to learn. Next time you've lost it with your child and you're beating yourself up, give yourself a break. No parent is perfect. It's fine. Let it go. Then go talk to your child. Apologize and strive to do better. That's all we can ever really ask of ourselves.

I said I was going to give you three power tools for connection that you could use when there's a rupture in your relationship with your child, to reconnect. The first was creating safety, by soothing and also by creating emotional safety. The second was empathy, and we've spent a lot of time discussing empathy. The final connection power tool is laughter.

Laughter is sometimes described as the fastest route between any two people, and that's because laughter cuts through the upset, it cuts through the lack of safety, and it connects us in a visceral way beyond words.

There are lots of ways to laugh with children. Children love to play, and they usually can't turn down an invitation to play. If you can find ways to calm yourself enough to connect with a sense of humor and to get your child laughing, you'll usually find your way to reconnect and to get through any relationship rupture.

Of course, sometimes kids are too upset to even laugh. At those times, really, they just need to cry or to feel sad or to tell you how angry they are. We'll talk more about handling emotions, and emotional intelligence next week.

Before we wrap up today, I just want to talk a little bit about games that you can play with your child to reconnect. Many of the games that children love are actually about separation and reconnection. Peek-a-boo, one of the earliest games that most children laugh about, is a separation and reconnection game. Hide-and-seek is a separation game. Chase games are both about power and about separation and reunion. Many of the games that get kids laughing are actually about connection.

There are other games that are about power, which also get kids laughing, and because it gets them laughing, it helps them reconnect. Especially if a child has been having a hard time with you, sometimes a power game can help them act that out and help them reconnect with you.

Say to your child, "Hey, can you push me across the room, or can I push you across the room?" and you put your hands up in front of you. Your child puts her hands against yours and pushes, and you push back, and you make sure that you give her a hard enough time that she has to work at it, but she is able to actually push you across the room – over your protests: "Hey, wait a minute. You can't be that strong. Wait a minute. We're going to try that again. I'm going to try

my hardest. No, you did it. I can't believe it. You're pushing me across the room." There are lots more games on the Aha! Parenting website. Just put the word "games" into the search box.

I have a couple of recommendations for books, as well. I mentioned Dr. Larry Cohen, who wrote *Playful Parenting*. He is also the co-author, along with Anthony DeBenedet, of *The Art of Roughhousing*. Another book with good games for young children is *Attachment Play* by Aletha Solter.

Finally, Patty Wipfler's HandInHandParenting.org is a great source on transforming those difficult moments where children are just starting to act out a little bit. If we can meet them with a sense of humor and address the need that's really going on, we can actually transform the moment.

A child who's having a hard time going to the potty, we can get laughing about their potty fears. A child who's having a hard time saying hello or goodbye to someone, we can acknowledge their feeling about saying hello and goodbye at the same time that they're respectful of the other person. They may not have to kiss grandpa hello if they're feeling nervous, but they have to say hello to him in some way. It might even be a shaking of the foot. You'll find a lot of ideas like that at HandInHandParenting.org.

We've been talking about play because laughter is such a great way to repair relationship ruptures, but play is also something you can do daily to create connection. For that reason, it's part of my preventive maintenance recommendations. We'll be talking much more about play when we get to preventive maintenance in Week 6.

We'll also talk in Week 6 about special time. You may think it's strange that we haven't talked about special time today in connection because special time is obviously a tool that's designed to help you connect with your child. But again, I think of special time as preventive maintenance, so we'll be covering it in Week 6.

Special time and roughhousing are things that take a little extra time in your day, but they make your day run more smoothly. But you'll notice that most of what we've discussed today doesn't actually take more time. It doesn't take you more time to empathize with your child than to fight with him. It doesn't take you more time to use a little goodbye ritual when you separate from her.

While it does take a little effort to make a list of ways to connect and put it up on your fridge and do at least one every day, I think you'll see that if you make sure you have at least five positive interactions for each negative interaction, you'll turn your relationship with your child around and make your whole day easier.

If you forget everything that I've said today, here's the thing to remember. Parenting is 80% connection. When things get rocky, Stop, Drop, and Breathe to regulate yourself. Then you can then turn around and re-connect with your child. If you can do that, you will change everything.

Of course, you're not just going to do it during those rocky moments, because if you want your child to feel safe enough to trust you and to trust that connection during the rocky moments, you have to do it the rest of the time, too. You have to stay in a relationship instead of just managing your child.

The secret, on a daily basis, is simply to consciously look for opportunities to connect with your child. They don't have to take a lot of extra time or any extra time. Simply, when you're together, instead of seeing your child as an object to be rushed through the schedule, see your child as your beloved who you want to connect with. You will find so much more sweetness in the relationship, and your child will blossom before your eyes and will be so much cooperative.

Thank you for joining me today, and for your commitment to your child and to your own growth. This ends Week 3 – Connecting with Your Child – of the Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids online class. This is Dr. Laura Markham of AhaParenting.com.