"Eli Harwood brings infectious energy, vulnerability, and fresh perspectives."

—**HILARY SWANK**, actress, storyteller, mom of twins



Using **Connection-Focused Parenting** to Create Confidence, Empathy, and Resilience

ELI HARWOOD, MA, LPC

Creator of Attachment Nerd

Praise for *Raising Securely Attached Kids*

"Eli Harwood brings infectious-fun energy, vulnerability, and fresh perspectives without shaming or blaming. Not only is *Raising Securely Attached Kids* a practical and actionable guide, it's grounded in science and entertaining to read. There is truly nothing that matters more to me in my life than building secure relationships with my children and loved ones."

—HILARY SWANK, actress, storyteller, mom of twins

"Eli Harwood teaches the essentials of attachment which can help us as parents all "show up" in ways that enable our children to become securely attached to us. This security then enables our kids to develop resilience and the capacity to connect with others in deeply rewarding ways."

—DANIEL J. SIEGEL, M.D., *New York Times* – bestselling co-author of *The Whole Brain Child*

"*Raising Securely Attached Kids* is a comprehensive road map for parents who want to raise securely attached, emotionally healthy children. Eli Harwood breaks down the science of attachment to offer practical insights for cultivating parent-child relationships based on safety, connection, and collaboration. A parenting must-read."

—ALYSSA BLASK CAMPBELL, M.Ed., author of *Tiny Humans, Big Emotions*

"Eli uses her charm, humor, and compelling storytelling ability to weave together a narrative that will guide parents toward a deep and transformative relationship with their children."

—TAMMY SCHAMUHN, author of *The Parenting Handbook* and cofounder of the Institute of Child Psychology

“Insightful, profound, poignant. This book seamlessly translates cutting-edge research into practical wisdom. Eli Harwood brings an outstanding fusion of knowledge and heart to the world of parenting.”

—DR. GALIT ATLAS, author of *Emotional Inheritance*

RAISING SECURELY ATTACHED KIDS

Using **Connection-Focused Parenting** to Create Confidence, Empathy, and Resilience

ELI HARWOOD, MA, LPC

SASQUATCH BOOKS
SEATTLE

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Dedicated to Slate, Remi, and Rune

You three are the best string of luck I have ever encountered. No matter how big you get, how crispy or soggy you feel, or how far you wander in the world, you will always have my arms to run to when you need a warm shelter and a place to be known.

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Introduction

There are so many good books and guides available to help us all learn how to parent in conscious, smart, and effective ways. While those resources are wonderful and can be a huge help in navigating particularly challenging situations or stages, clients often come to me reporting that the techniques or approaches in these books "don't work," and that they have had to fall back on parenting techniques that they don't want to use, like yelling, shaming, and punishing.

When I check out the books they have been consulting, they usually offer sound parenting advice. But the advice written in them is advice that works brilliantly *if* and *only if* we have already cultivated a secure attachment pattern with our children. Attachment research is clear: the quality of the relationship between a caregiver and a child is the first ingredient necessary for helping our children to learn, grow, and thrive. While it's great to learn an acronym to help us stick to a consistent routine, it won't do diddly-squat in the long run if our children don't emotionally trust us.

Creating a secure relationship with our children is the foundational step in helping them live deeply fulfilling, meaningful, and connected lives. When our children feel seen, heard, supported, and emotionally soothed by us, the practical parenting tips and tricks work way more often.

A connected relationship is truly the most outstanding ingredient needed to raise a well-regulated, socially capable, all-around secure kid who grows into a caring, confident, and resilient adult.

Secure attachment also benefits us by making for a far more enjoyable child-rearing process. Instead of being at odds with our children in a constant battle for power, we get to be their allies and supporters as they navigate this wild ride we call life.

This book will:

- Help you create a secure attachment relationship with your children across different developmental stages
- Reflect on attachment patterns you developed in childhood and why you respond in certain ways during emotional moments with your children
- Guide you in resolving past attachment traumas or insecurities so they don't hinder your ability to offer calm, connected, and secure relationships with your children
- Provide secure scripts and practical tools you can use in specific scenarios with your kids to build trust and repair conflicts
- Show you what to do about the tricky or uncomfortable topics we all face in our parenting journey
- Encourage you to (securely) release the reins of influence as your children grow in independence

FACT #1: ATTACHMENT RESEARCH AND CONNECTION-FOCUSED PARENTING IS NOT NEW

I want to clear up a misconception. Connection-focused parenting is not a trend or something I personally discovered or made up.

A close, connected parent-child relationship is an instinct inside both us and our children designed to help protect our young by keeping them close to us, especially in moments of danger or perceived danger. It has been practiced in every

Indigenous culture since the beginning of human existence. And it even exists as an instinct in all mammals to varying degrees. While using attachment theory to guide a connection-focused parenting style may seem new in contrast to parenting trends of the past couple of centuries, those "old-timey" parenting advice trends are not as old as our instinct to form secure attachments with our children. The patterns that we often think of as "old-school" happened relatively recently in the span of human existence as a result of wars, colonization, economic and natural disasters, and the influence of people who did not have a solid understanding of attachment science. (Thankfully, we do now.)

For instance, in the 1930s, Dr. John Watson, one of the founders of behaviorism, gave this advice to parents in his book *Behaviorism*: "Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit in your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning." In response to this notion, I think Homer J. Simpson said it best: *"Doh!"* (With accompanying head slap.)

Disconnected parenting advice like Dr. Watson's went viral in the 1900s and merged with the unresolved traumas that many people were navigating during that era.

As behaviorism-based parenting was making waves in popular thought in the 1950s and '60s, researchers like Harry Harlow and John Bowlby began questioning the validity of those notions by doing important studies on the relationship between children and parents, and the long-term impacts that come with different levels of connection in those relationships.

As you read, some of these ideas may seem new to you, but remember that secure attachment patterns are as old-school as human survival and adaptation instincts. Attachment science has been validated by an incredibly rich and complex body of research that has been happening continuously since

the 1950s and replicated over and over again across many cultures.

You're not hopping onto a new bandwagon here, you're tapping into some of the oldest wisdom around: the wisdom of close human relationships. While attachment science has been around since the 1950s, a wider knowledge of the subject of attachment in the greater culture and community has not.

When I first started studying attachment in 2007, the resources available were exclusively intended for nerdy graduate students like myself. Full of big words, lots of scientific data, and very little guidance on how to heal or shift attachment patterns. I *loved* the big words because it helped me to trust this research. But I also felt uncomfortable with the fact that these incredible truths about the parent-child relationship were inaccessible and obscure for anyone outside of the research and clinical world.

While we need the scientific data to ensure that we are not simply joining some random internet parenting trend, we also need the data to be accessible and easy to apply so that we can actually improve our lives! In these pages, I'll take the incredible science given to us by some very special smarty-pants folks over the last seventy-plus years, and translate it into easy-to-understand words and concepts so that it's practical to apply in our parenting journey.

I know, however, that some of you are like me and you *want* to dig into the science facts behind attachment research, so I have set aside some of the nerdier data for you fellow attachment nerds in sections called Nerd Alerts. If science and studies make you repeatedly yawn and want to doodle on a notebook, feel free to skip the Nerd Alerts and stay with the stories, scripts, and tips!

This book is meant to help you support your child in an optimal developmental process, to create a deeply secure bond

with them, and to help you identify how to use connection to guide them (and you) through those challenging crucible moments that every parent and child encounters along the way.

FACT #2: SECURELY ATTACHED PARENTING IS NOT THE SAME AS ATTACHMENT PARENTING

The term "attachment parenting" was coined by Dr. William Sears, a pediatrician who created a parenting philosophy that is loosely based on attachment ideas, but he makes some correlations that are not indicated by the developmental attachment science. His work was very popular in the 2000s and advocated for specific infant care strategies such as breastfeeding, bed-sharing, and baby-wearing. While none of these recommendations are inherently harmful to an attachment dynamic, they are not the keys to secure attachment. The keys are emotional connection and co-regulation. Don't worry if that sounds abstract right now; by the end of this book, you will know exactly what it takes to create a secure attachment with your child!

ATTACHMENT NERD WORD LIST

In order to best help us all understand what the science says about raising securely attached kids and how to actually apply it in real life, there are a few nerdy terms that come from the land of academia that I just cannot find a way to de-nerdify.

But if at any point in the book you are noticing a word that you don't understand, come on back here and check out the glossary for guidance.

ATTUNEMENT: The skill required for emotional connection where a person is able to accurately pick up on the emotional cues of another person and receive those cues enough to communicate empathy in an effective way.

CO-REGULATION: How a parent helps a child to return to calm. It can also be used when referring to the process of emotional regulation between two adults, like two sweethearts or a therapist and their client. One calm(er) person helping a less calm person to feel seen, heard, nurtured, and therefore more regulated.

DYSREGULATED: Not calm. A person who is yelling and throwing things and running around the room name-calling is dysregulated. So is someone who is in the middle of a panic attack. Or someone who has emotionally left the room and is shut off or dissociated. A body that is unable to be both calm *and* present is dysregulated.

MISATTUNEMENT: A moment where someone misreads (by overreading emotion) or fails to receive the emotional state of another person (either by not noticing or by actively dismissing the emotional state).

REGULATED: Calm. A "regulated" nervous system means that the brain is not overfiring with intense emotions or under-firing in shutdown. Think of a car motor; a regulated car motor is not overheating or stalling out. A regulated child or adult is processing clearly and not blowing an emotional gasket or emotionally shutoff.

Phew. You did it. You read through the nerdy words. Do you feel fancy now? I hope so! I want *all of us* to inherit and adapt these attachment words into our personal parenting vocabulary and understanding. While these words originated in the research, I hope they will now belong to the people!

AGES AND STAGES AND DIVERSITY

Did you know that, as of the second I am writing this book, there are approximately 8,071,780,714 human beings on planet Earth? That's a boatload of unique stories, family combinations, identities, and life dynamics. Each and every

one of you comes with a different dynamic, perspective, and needs.

Here are some thoughts to help you consider how to best use this book for *your particular parenting reality.*

PARENTS OF WEE ONES: If you are starting this book before you have children or while your children are still wee ones, that is *supersmart stuff*! It's such a tremendous gift to you and to them to start working on your attachment patterns now. There will be content in this guide that you have not yet encountered in your parenting journey—don't skip over it. It will help you form the kind of mindset and awareness that will keep you more on your toes and less flat out on your back when the hard stuff comes rolling down your street.

PARENTS OF SEMI-GROWNS: If you are starting this book and your children are grown-*ish*, maybe they are in late elementary school or in early to late adolescence, *I am so stinkin' proud of you*! You may be continuing the labor it takes to keep a secure bond, or you are learning it for the first time; either way, our kids need us to be secure attachment figures for them at every stage of life.

PARENTS OF FULL-GROWNS: *You are a diamond in the rough!!!* To take up a book like this after your children have flown the coop means you are truly a person of great heart and integrity. Perhaps you are reading to help you understand your adult child's perspective on their childhood, or you want to know what you could have done differently, or you are helping to raise your grandchildren and want to give them what you were not able to give to your children. Well done, you are modeling for your family that it is never too late to grow and change, and that is no small feat.

PARENTS OF NEUROSPECIALIZED KIDS: If you have a child who has autism, ADHD, high sensitivity, cognitive impairment, or Down syndrome, you have a neurospecialized kid (often

referred to as “neurodiverse” or “neurodivergent”). What that means is that your child’s brain and developmental process will not match the large portion of the bell curve of typical child development. As you read through these pages, you will notice recommendations and ideas that won’t apply to your child. Throw them out! You know your child better than anyone else on planet Earth, and definitely better than I do!

PARENTS OF CHILDREN WHO FACE IDENTITY OPPRESSION: As a straight, cis-gendered white woman living in America with the financial means to care for myself and my family, I want to acknowledge that this book was written through my lens. While I worked hard to consider as many different parents as possible while I wrote this text, there will be gaps and topics that are missing for you. I honor that there are crucial dynamics that you are navigating in the world that my children and I are not. Your reality deserves space.

I hope as many of you as possible will delve into the field of attachment science and add your unique voices and viewpoints into the dialogue to accurately capture the nuance of the ways we understand humanity around such a central and pervasive topic.

PARENTS OF CHILDREN WHO KNOW CAPITAL T TRAUMA: If you and your children have had to live through present-day traumas such as domestic violence, war, relinquishment from birth families, foster care, adoption, poverty, or traumatic loss such as the death of a parent or child, you are not only trying to give your children a secure attachment with you, you are also trying to help your children (and yourself) heal from truly disturbing life experiences. You are therapeutic parenting. Your children will struggle in ways that children who have not faced this level of trauma will not struggle. That’s okay. You’re not failing, you are all navigating *way* more than any family should have to. Be as kind and compassionate to yourself and your kids as you can, and healing will come as you continue to

connect and attune and give support. It just may take a while. Big trauma takes big time and big patience to heal.

SECURE READING GUIDELINES

There is no wrong way to read this book. Read it cuddled up in bed or sweating on your stationary bike. Read it in small chunks or read it all at once. *But,* regardless of the place or the pace at which you read it, I want to suggest a couple of emotional safety guidelines for your reading to help protect your heart and your relationships.

These pages and words are never to be used as weapons. Not against anyone else, and *certainly not against yourself.* You will most likely come upon information in this book that highlights insecure patterns that you experienced as a child, or that you unconsciously cultivated with your children. That will bring about painful feelings. Whatever feelings that arise—anger, shame, sorrow, fear, etc.—I want you to use them as an opportunity to practice reaching for comfort and support from people who love you, not as an opportunity to punish or blame yourself or anyone else. Parents are doing the best we can with what we have, and we don't all have access to secure relationships or healing information in the same ways or at the same point in our parenting journey.

These pages are an invitation to action. The most profound gift we can give our children is *our own growth.* When you see something in this book that challenges you to do better, please work on it! Put these pages into action and get these words moving in your real life. Even if your first attempts at change feel clunky or awkward, they are profound attempts at healing attachment insecurity, and that is beautiful, no matter how uncomfortable it feels at first.

These pages invite processing with others. If you are healing your generational stuff without any support, it is going to be far more painful and burdensome. We are not meant to

grieve and process and rear our children in isolation. We need other people to help us help them. Find a therapist (or, as my mother most endearingly refers to her therapist, a Rent-A-Friend). Or find a group of friends as dedicated to your parenting style as you are, and start a support/book group to read through the text together.

ONE

The Most Important Lesson

A few nights ago I was lying in bed with my twin daughters, trying to help them get to sleep, when one of them peeped up, "Mama, how do the construction workers build our house?" I was both tickled and annoyed by the question. Tickled because it is truly a gift to be in the presence of a curious child, and annoyed because the timing for an in-depth discussion on construction processes was less than ideal for me.

But if I have been told one thing consistently by strangers in grocery stores over the years, it is this: "Cherish the sweet moments when your children are small because they are gone all too soon." So I did my best to satiate her curiosity with a basic rundown: "First the construction workers pour a foundation to make sure the house is stable. Then they frame the house to help build it up. Then they put in the walls and roof and floor. After that they add all the other things a house needs."

After answering her question, I realized that this was truly a perfect metaphor for what attachment science has taught us about parenting. If our children are houses, then our attachment relationships with them are their foundations. The more secure the foundation, the sturdier the house and the simpler the rest of the build.

YOU ARE SECURE WITH ME

Of all of the lessons we teach our children (and there are an estimated 78 billion), there is one lesson that is more important and impactful than all of the others combined. That is the lesson we teach our children about the quality of their

attachment to us. The hope is that the lesson is specifically and emphatically, “You are secure with me.”

From the day our children land in our arms, they are learning whether or not they can rely on us for connection and support.

Do we notice and respond when they are in physical or emotional pain? Do we light up when they walk into the room? Do we celebrate them in moments of pride and accomplishment, and also reassure them in moments of indiscretion and shame? Do we approach their rough choices with compassion and understanding and effective guidance?

Above all else, does running into our arms when they are tender and distressed leave them feeling settled, soothed, and secure? (The gold standard of having a securely attached relationship.) Or do our insecure attachment patterns instead leave our children feeling dismissed, overwhelmed, or scared in their most vulnerable emotional states?

As relational creatures, the reality of our caregiver’s capacity to *connect with us* and to *help us regulate our emotional states* is truly the foundation for our development. It’s what attachment theory is all about. When we are able to cultivate positive connections with our children, they are able to optimally develop a strong sense of self, connection to others, and resilience in the face of life’s adversities. University of Minnesota attachment researcher Dr. Alan Sroufe says it like this: “A flexible, smoothly regulated caregiver-child system is the foundation for a self-confident, well-regulated, resilient child.”

Every other lesson our children learn is learned *in the context of the attachment lesson.* Human beings learn about relationships before we learn anything else, and it is our attachment relationship with our parents that most profoundly impacts our ability to learn other things.

Children who have the advantage of a secure attachment experience have a far more stable and secure trajectory in life. While it is possible to transform an insecure pattern into a secure pattern later on (thank "goodknees," as my three-year-old says), it takes healing efforts that cost time, energy, and often finances. The hope is that we can do as much work as possible to heal our parenting patterns now and give our children secure experiences with us so that they have significantly less healing work to do themselves.

Beards and Bases

When my children were babies, they all had strong opinions about mustaches and beards. My eldest found them charming. In fact, he preferred people with offensively large swaths of facial hair. He found them incredibly amusing and would tug and giggle freely as if the wearer had donned their beard simply to entertain him. If you had a stache, my baby boy would let you hold him no matter how long you had known him.

My twin daughters, on the other hand? Entirely suspicious of all Tom Selleck look-alikes. They were convinced that facial hair was a surefire indication of nefarious intent and would run into my arms anytime a hairy-faced human even glanced in their general direction.

They felt distressed by facial hair, and their attachment instinct sent them to me for support. After a couple of minutes of burrowing face down in my chest, they would draw upon the groundedness of my nervous system and settle their own bodies, knowing that they were safe in my arms.

This mustache phobia was particularly hard on my brother because his face was impressively hairy when my girls were little. At family gatherings, we had our work cut out for us. Back and forth from looking at the bearded monster uncle to fleeing into my lap until, usually hours later, my brother would

win them over with goofy antics and convince them he was a fun uncle instead of a cave-dwelling kidnapper.

This dance my girls were doing between mustaches and my arms is the dance of secure attachment: the movement all human beings are initially wired to experience between the security of their caregiver's arms and the novel, exciting, and sometimes scary world outside of those arms.

Facial hair was activating my daughter's attachment systems by signaling danger ("This person is disguised and therefore up to no good!"), then activating distress in their nervous systems ("Runnnnnnn!!"), then sending them shooting into my arms ("Find the safe haven!).

Then, once they were in my arms, they were absorbing my calming and connected responses to them ("Mom doesn't seem freaked out") and then refocusing their attention away from their distress ("Beards feel scary!") and into their curiosity ("That bearded dude actually seems pretty silly").

Though I, of course, wanted my children to eventually learn that facial hair doesn't automatically equal danger, I knew that they were learning a more foundational lesson: *that I was a source of safety and emotional support for their tender and distressing needs.*

In other words, I could effectively protect and soothe them when their nervous systems were flooded with fear. I was also capable of understanding what was happening inside their bodies and helping them to regulate them. That their inner worlds were real, and that they could expect me to be consistently calm and compassionate toward them.

That they could be securely attached to me.

WHAT EXACTLY IS ATTACHMENT?

Did you ever play tag as a kid? It was one of my favorites.

Remember home base? And remember the *thrill of leaving it* and the *relief of returning to it*? On a much larger and complex scale, we are our children's home base. In attachment research, we talk about the home base in two distinct ways. First as a safe haven, a physical and emotional shelter where our children can run to for safety and rest. And second as a secure base, a reliable backup support that gives our children the confidence they need to launch out into the world beyond our arms.

If a saber-toothed tiger shows up at a playground, a human child is far less likely to be its lunch if there is an adult around to help them flee or fight. Better yet if an entire family or village has their back.

Relationships are the key to human survival.

Even though we are far less likely to meet a tiger behind our homes these days, this attachment adaptation still applies to threats in modern life. For example, data shows that we are far more likely to successfully beat depression, or overcome a trauma, or rally against an oppressive system, or get over a breakup, if we have a supportive group of people to turn to.

Close, supportive relationships are extremely helpful for any distressing situation we face in life.

Attachment scientists theorize that it is our attachment system that allows us to develop such complex and large brains. Human beings are born extremely helpless and dependent when compared to other animals. When elephants and giraffes are born, they start walking within minutes of their birth! It is assumed that our attachment drive and correlating relational development process give our brains more time to grow, which, in turn, may be why human beings have developed so much more complex speech and processing skills than other mammals.

And though this attachment drive initially functions to keep us safe in early life, it doesn't end when we are old enough to "fend for ourselves." Healthy human development involves close relationships throughout our lifespan, which is why attachment goes both ways, from child to parent *and* from parent to child. And then, in adulthood, it transforms into myriad other important close relationships, like friend to friend and sweetheart to sweetheart.

As parents, our attachment system gives us pleasure and delight in our children despite the fact that they deny us sleep, throw up on us, drain our life savings, and spill their beverages all over our favorite rugs. We endure the hazing of the constant needs of our children because we are deeply bonded to them and wired to stay close to protect them from harm while they develop the ability to self-care. Our children are, in turn, nurturing our hearts and bodies with this deeply meaningful and purposeful connection to them.

The fascinating paradox that attachment research has revealed about human development is that when we feel securely attached to our caregivers in early childhood, it actually *increases* our independent adventuring later on. The more secure nurture and co-regulation a child receives, the more internalized confidence and trust they have in us and in themselves, which allows them to focus on the tasks of learning and exploring!

What Attachment Pattern Did We Have Growing Up?

If you are one of the estimated 50 percent of people who had a secure attachment with your parents as children (it's *not* me), the process of raising your children in the same way will likely feel comfortable and even intuitive. In my group of college friends, one of the five of us grew up in a home where they were securely attached to their caregivers. Luckily she was the

first of us to have children, so we could all take notes as she instinctively gave her children empathy and guidance without devolving into the kind of reactivity or disconnection the rest of us had learned growing up.

Unfortunately the other 50 percent of us enter parenthood without ever having had the advantage of a secure attachment experience ourselves. We show up to the parenting job like: "What in the heckfire am I supposed to be doing here?"

We may have had parents who were uncomfortable with emotions and either dismissed feelings avoidantly ("You're fine, don't be so dramatic") or anxiously responded to our feelings in overbearing or intrusive ways ("OMG, should we head to the hospital?!"). We then developed an insecure-avoidant pattern of coping. We had to learn to ignore and internalize our emotions because *no one around us was capable of reading our emotions accurately or soothing us effectively.*

Or we may have had parents who were unpredictable with their warmth and responsiveness to us. They were *sometimes* able to be there for us, but not enough to help us feel that we could securely count on their care. We then developed an insecure-resistant pattern of coping. We learned to anxiously scan others for signs of disconnection, making it *hard for us to trust and accept reassurance or soothing responses.*

Lastly, some of us grew up in homes with caregivers who were frightening to us. In other words, parent-child relationships that were physically, emotionally, or sexually abusive. That is a terribly disorienting attachment experience. In this reality, a child has to *always* watch their back, never sure who to trust or where they can rest safely. *There is no safe home base to take a breath.* Our parent figure(s) was a source of distress or danger, not of safety and soothing. We then developed a disorganized pattern of coping.

Knowing what attachment pattern(s) we had with our different caregivers growing up is a huge step in the process of cultivating secure attachment with our children now. Why? Because once we have identified the early patterns *we* developed with our caregivers in childhood, we can begin to work on shifting them into more secure ways of relating to our children.

> **PARENTING PERSPECTIVE**
>
> **Recognizing Patterns Is the First Step to Healing**
>
> By using these definitions of attachment patterns, I was able to identify the different types of attachments I had formed with all my caregivers—parents, grandparents, aunts. These definitions were especially important as a new parent born of generational trauma. It was extremely helpful to be given the tools necessary to help break the cycles that can be handed down from parent to child. I now feel better equipped to raise my child with a secure attachment style, while garnering a better understanding of my relationship with my parents.
>
> —ANGELA CALDWELL, Indigenous American, biologist, new mother of one

How Your Attachment Experiences Affected Your Response to Feeling Emotions

Now, let's shift from how our parents responded to our emotional states to the patterns we developed as a result. When we were sad or scared or feeling ashamed or overwhelmed, what did we do to cope with our parent's responses?

SECURE: If we had consistently warm and responsive and calm parents, we developed a secure attachment relationship with

them. We learned to *reach* and *receive* when we were upset, scared, or in a state of distress.

AVOIDANT: If we had consistently cold, dismissive, or emotionally anxious parents, we developed an avoidant attachment relationship with them. We learned to *avoid* and *distract* when we were upset, scared, or in a state of distress.

RESISTANT: If we had caregivers who were inconsistent and were *sometimes* warm and responsive, but also anxious or cold/dismissive a significant amount of the time, we developed a resistant attachment relationship with them. We learned to *reach* and *reject* when we were upset, scared, or in a state of distress.

DISORGANIZED: If we had caregivers who were deeply unstable and scary toward us, we developed a disorganized attachment relationship with them. We learned to *shut off* or *blow up* in response to feeling upset, scared, or in a state of distress.

The good news is that no matter what kind of attachment experience we grew up with, whether it was secure, avoidant, resistant, or disorganized, there is solid data that we can put in the work to learn how to be a safe haven and secure base for our children, and land in a category that the researchers call "earned secure attachment," where we learn our way to securely attached patterns!

Which brings me to the subject of our very first Nerd Alert (this page), a study that has truly transformed the way that developmental psychologists and psychotherapists understand human development. I was trained to score this research protocol at the University of Minnesota with Professor Emeritus Alan Sroufe. It was an incredible and transformative experience for my perspectives on children, parenting, and attachment.

While our infant attachment patterns are not a diagnosis, or traits that are eternally set in stone, most people continue their

early childhood attachment patterns into their teen and adulthood attachments and then unintentionally pass those patterns on to the next generation as well.

Unless.

Unless there is someone in the family system ready to heal and change the pattern. Which is the number-one reason I became obsessed with this body of research.

Attachment patterns can change.

We can move from an insecure attachment pattern to a secure pattern. We can transform ourselves and our relationships with our children to cultivate a trajectory of connection and security.

Rad, right?

Whether you had secure, avoidant, resistant, or disorganized experiences as a child, you can grow to become a secure parent and raise some bouncing secure babies and secure toddlers and even secure teenagers! This can happen when we are mid-childhood, or mid-adulthood. It can happen when our children are still in our bodies, or when they are fourteen or thirty-nine. It is never too late to learn secure attachment patterns and to give our children the incredible gift of having securely attached parents.

A FEW WORDS ON TEMPERAMENT

"Temperament" is the nerdy word to describe a child's hardwired traits, or their nature. It is the ingrained personality and genetic/biological predispositions that we all come with. A child's developmental journey is an intricate dance between their temperament (how they are wired) and the environment's response to them (how they are treated).

Attachment does not affect temperament. When we securely love our children, we do not alter their core

personality or nature. But temperament *can* affect attachment. Specifically, when our temperament and our child's temperament collide, sometimes those realities make it harder to stay generally calm, attuned, and responsively caring.

In life, we all experience both risk factors and protective factors during our developmental journey. Some of those factors are external, like our communities and available resources, and some of those factors are internal, such as our neurological functioning or genetic vulnerability to organic mental illness.

Our goal in offering our children secure attachment is that despite challenges in their life, they will have the advantage of a caregiver who is warm, attentive, caring, and consistent.

Children can have temperaments that lead them to be naturally strong-willed or highly sensitive, introverted or extraverted, sensory seeking or sensory avoidant. I could make a list a mile long, as human beings are incredibly diverse in our varying temperaments. While all of these unique temperaments will require us to do different levels of emotional and practical labor, they do not change the fact that all children need secure attachment experiences in order to thrive in their own way. Remember, we don't decide who our children are or how they are wired, but we do have influence over how they feel about those things through the ways we respond to them and work to accept them for who they are wired to be.

NERD ALERT: The Strange Situation

Pioneering thinkers like John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, along with contemporaries such as Alan Sroufe, Mary Main, and others, knew that there is a diverse spectrum of ways parents relate to their children, and theorized that the quality of the

relationship between children and caregivers is massively influential on the ways that human beings grow, learn, and build other relationships later on.

To scientifically test these theories, developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth created a research tool she named the Strange Situation.

The goal was to test the quality of the attachment relationship between mothers and children by putting twelve- to eighteen-month-old babies in a “strange” (moderately stressful) situation so that scientists could then observe the child’s reactions to the situation and their attachment responses to their caregivers while in distress.

In other words, Ainsworth and her contemporaries wanted to know: “What does this child ‘know’ about their caregiver’s ability to support and soothe them?”

An important detail to address is that when the initial research was done in 1965, it was still widely assumed that mothers were always the primary attachment caregiver. The idea that a man was capable of being a nurturing figure wasn’t yet socially acceptable. The early videos are exclusively mothers and children. Luckily, this research has been later replicated with dads and grandparents and adoptive parents, and the outcomes have been cohesive.

Though women still tend to take on the role of primary caregiver and attachment figure, many more men or gender nonbinary parents function in

that role in present day. Anyone who plays a significant caretaking role with a child can be an attachment figure. It is not sex chromosomes that make a person nurturing. People of any gender can be incredible attachment figures to their children. And children usually have more than one attachment figure, despite having one they tend to prefer over others in the younger years.

It is also important to address the questions of race and culture. The original SSP research was done in Baltimore, Maryland, on a group of middle-class white families. Not a great sample size or representation of human experience. Thankfully, the Strange Situation protocol is one of the most replicated studies in all of psychology. By 2021, it had been conducted over and over in diverse communities all over the world, from China to Germany to the Philippines and the Republic of the Congo.

The global replication of this study is extremely important because it has validated the finding that these four attachment patterns exist across cultures.

How Does the Study Work?

The Strange Situation is divided into six "episodes" that go like this:

1. A primary caregiver and a baby (twelve to eighteen months old) are left in a room for three minutes with toys and observed while they play.
2. A stranger enters the room (which heightens the baby's stress system), and they talk calmly with the caregiver for three minutes.

3 The caregiver leaves the child in the room alone with the stranger to intensify their distress response. This separation never lasts more than three minutes and is cut short if the child gets severely dysregulated. →

4 After this distressing three minutes or less, the caregiver returns to the room and is reunited with their baby. The stranger exits the room and gives the caregiver and baby time to be together alone.

5 The caregiver leaves the baby in the room alone without anyone else to further activate the child's stress response.

6 The caregiver returns to the room for a final reunion.

What happens in the reunion at the end gives us tremendous data about how the child copes with distress and their particular attachment experience with the caregiver.

There is a clear set of patterned ways (one secure, three insecure) that babies respond to the reunion with their caregivers. This is meaningful because it tells us that even at twelve to eighteen months of age, babies already know whether or not their caregivers can handle their tender, distressed feelings.

SECURE BABIES: These babies do two very important things when their caregiver returns from a separation episode. 1) They actively initiate and seek closeness to the caregiver. Some seek reassuring eye contact, some through running and climbing up their caregivers. 2) Then, after seeking

connection, they quickly soothe and settle within three minutes of reunion.

Securely attached babies have caregivers who are warm, comforting, and predictable. Their caregivers help them to regulate when they need support. These babies cry hard when their caregivers leave the room. They do not want to be left with a stranger or alone in a strange place. But when their caregiver returns, they run freely toward them and feel relief upon reconnection.

This is what I want for all of us and our children: a relationship that is secure enough that our children feel compelled to run to us when they are in need and are soothed by us in that connection process.

INSECURE-AVOIDANT BABIES: These babies are often mistaken for secure babies in Western culture because they cry the least of all the babies in the study. Alas, this is untrue. An avoidantly attached baby 1) shows little outward response when their caregivers leave them with the stranger, and 2) when their caregiver returns, they keep their attention on the toys rather than the reunion. These little tykes have learned how to hide their distress inwardly and to deal with tender feelings all on their own. At twelve months of age. Yikes! This is not healthy independence, this is insecure avoidance.

Despite the fact that these insecure-avoidant babies do not exhibit their distress outwardly, a follow-up study discovered their saliva indicated higher stress responses than secure babies. They experience the distress of separation in their body even more than the outwardly crying secure

babies, but they have learned that it is useless to cry or reach out, so they simply distract themselves.

INSECURE-RESISTANT BABIES: These babies look similar to secure babies upon separation, because they cry openly and do not want their caregiver to leave. Upon reunion, they start to seek proximity when their caregiver returns, but then they either change their minds partway through the seeking process or they engage in what is considered "protest" behavior, i.e., pushing or slapping the parent or rejecting an offered toy. They also do not soothe and calm quickly once their caregiver is back. They are angry at their caregiver for leaving and do not trust them to consistently attend to their needs.

DISORGANIZED BABIES: These babies have been neglected or abused by their caregivers and so are not able to use their attachment figures to cope with their tender needs. Our attachment instincts get all scrambled up if the person we are primarily dependent on is frightening in some way, or is completely incompetent at protecting you. →

These kiddos' attachment instincts are fragmented from a fear of harm from the person who is supposed to protect them. This is terribly disorienting and results in reactivity and dissociation.

There is one particularly disturbing video of a Strange Situation reunion I watched between a mother and child that has stuck with me deeply. After being left alone in the final separation episode of the Strange Situation study, the mother returned to the room and sternly ordered the child to come to her. The small girl started making

animalistic moaning sounds as her mother told her to “get right here now and stop crying.” The girl was looking at the ground instead of at her mother, and her arms were pointed in the exact opposite direction (behind her) as she tentatively moved closer to her mother. It was as if her different biological instincts (to seek safety and to seek a caregiver) were tearing her in two.

This poor little gal had no safe home base. Deeply embedded in her mental hardware was the idea that there is no safe place in the world. Her attachment experience was wrought with terror and confusion.

These early attachment experiences set the stage for her ability to self-regulate and her self-image later in life.

While any insecure attachment experience is painful and requires work to heal, a disorganized attachment experience is truly the hardest to repair. It can be done, but the doing is tremendously challenging.

SECURE ATTACHMENT LOOKS DIFFERENT IN DIFFERENT STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

I want to underscore two very important points here: our children need secure attachment from us at every single stage of life, and the specifics of their attachment needs change as they grow and develop. Attachment dynamics evolve in our relationships with our children and can become more or less secure over time, which is why we want to continue to work on ourselves and our relationships with our children no matter how old they (or we!) are.

In Utero

This may seem obvious once I say it, but all human babies grow inside of and *literally* attached to another human being. The umbilical cord is the source of survival in the womb, a link that helps a developing embryo turn into a fetus, and then into a baby. Human beings are made not only of the genetic material that formed us into a blastocyst, but once we attach, we then accumulate the entirety of our cells and body from the human housing the uterus we are in.

The metaphor of attachment is not merely about the energy between human beings in a relational sense; it is also the biological predisposition for how we form. We don't hatch in an egg outside of a parent's body, we grow inside of them, in full physical connection to them.

And what happens in the uterus can influence a child's developing brain.

If you are pregnant at this moment, I want to encourage you to talk to your child regularly. We have data that shows that babies can hear us and recognize our voices even while they are still buns in the oven! Plus, it is good to practice connected relating even before they are in our arms. It helps them to learn our voice, and it helps us to prepare our heart for the incredible bond we are already cultivating. A child can already feel the comforting sense of our presence, attunement to them, and dedication to their well-being and care even before they leave the womb.

Infancy

When a child exits the womb and enters the arms of their caregivers, they may have lost the physical attachment of the umbilical connection, but they are still in need of a tremendous amount of physical proximity to caregivers.

It is now protocol in most hospitals to meet this proximity need by utilizing a protocol called “skin to skin,” where a newborn baby is placed directly onto the bare chest of their caregiver(s) as soon as they are out of the womb. This is done because there is evidence that babies who experience this closeness have enhanced cardiorespiratory stability, including oxygen levels, blood glucose levels, and regulated body temperature! This calming regulation of closeness to us allows our wee babes to focus on other important stuff like eating and pooping and peeing and growing.

In some ways, the attachment dance is simplest during infancy (though perhaps the most physically exhausting). Infants are wired to cry when they need something from us, and we are wired to respond. Crying is their communication and the most effective way to signal their needs to us.

When infants cry, we launch into the great parent investigation process. Is their diaper dirty? Are they hungry? Is their onesie irritating them? Maybe they are overtired? Or need a toy? Or their pacifier?

Sometimes what they need is simply to be held close. This is a *legit* need. Even though *we* know they are safe and attended to, sometimes *they* can’t tell. This is especially true for infants wired with high sensitivity. They sense when we are away (even if we are just trying to poo in peace), because they are not yet able to make meaning out of things, their cognitive senses have not formed, and they are wired to get anxious when they can’t sense us near. This is also why many infants demand to sleep directly on the chest of their caregiver instead of in their adorable, cozy bassinets or cribs.

Secure attachment in infancy is about saying yes as much as we can. The more yes responses we can give to an infant, the safer they feel in our haven, and the more optimal their brain development process.

SIDE NOTE

Maternal and parental mental health varies wildly. Some parents have tons of support and time off and can focus on infant care and high responsiveness with little stress. Other parents have unsupportive partners or multiple jobs or a history of mental illness that makes the process of infant care far more complex. Plus, many parents experience some variance of postpartum depression or anxiety.

The goal of secure attachment in infancy/babyhood is to give our children the highest level of responsiveness that is possible in our situation. For some parents, that will mean the ability to get up at night for as long as a child is still waking; for other parents, that will mean finding ways to help a child learn to sleep for longer stretches. The key is to be mindful of offering as much responsiveness as possible while keeping our heads screwed on as straight as we can.

Toddlerhood

As a baby grows and develops into a child, their attachment needs become more complex. They still need closeness and proximity, but they also need limits and lessons to keep them safe. If infancy is the stage of "yes," toddlerhood is where children are necessarily introduced to the word "no."

The toddler's world explodes open into more than just needs, largely because they have mobilized and can crawl and walk around. Their brain is also on fire, making more new neural connections than at any other stage in human life. They peak in curiosity in everything around them, and they develop a strong sense of *wanting* things. Sometimes those wants involve their fingers and electrical sockets.

A secure parent continues to offer their toddler the nurture they need to feel regulated when they are tender or emotional while simultaneously adding in the limits and structure they

need to stay safe and healthy. Secure parenting is no longer a simple “yes.” It’s often a “no” or a “not yet” or a “not in that way.”

Toddlerhood is also when more complex emotions enter into the child’s repertoire, most remarkably anger, jealousy, and shame. These complex emotions in a toddler can feel overwhelming to them *and to us.* Their reactions to these feelings are underdeveloped and often trigger primal behavioral responses like hitting, running away, yelling, etc.

The role of a secure parent in this stage is to consistently give our children empathy while we educate them about their feelings, needs, and appropriate ways to cope with them.

Preschool Age

When children enter the three- to five-year-old zone of life, they are able to comprehend more about the world, themselves, and their relationships. During this stage, they are often able to articulate understanding of social expectations but still not always able to apply those expectations in terms of behavior. High comprehension and low impulse control make this stage of attachment a bit of an emotional trip for parents.

Our preschoolers need us to continue to guide them in learning about safe and connected social behavior and patterns, while giving them tons of opportunities to practice and “redo” when they miss the mark.

My two most effectively used phrases during this stage of development with my children were:

“Oopsies! Let’s try that again…”

“Almost! Next time, let’s try…”

School Age

As children move beyond toddlerhood and preschool, their brain development usually shifts in terms of the frequency and intensity of their emotional reactions. While the toddler brain is on fire in terms of emotions and stimulation seeking, the school-age brain is a steadier flame.

This is an exquisite time in life to share in exploration and adventure with our children. To join them in being curious about ideas, places, and people. Our role continues to be central as a safe haven for them to rely on when they are sad or scared or ashamed, etc. But our role as a secure base/launch pad will have grown significantly as well.

When our children are in this stage, they need our encouragement and acceptance of their new experiences outside of their relationship with us. At school, with friends, and with hobbies that they enjoy away from our guidance.

We are still the primary person our children will turn to with their tender needs and struggles. They do not need us to push them to independence but rather to continue to offer open arms when they need them, and to give them opportunities to venture further out into the world on their own in ways that feel safe and comfortable to them.

Adolescence

Heaps of complex changes and floods of overwhelming emotions happen to all tweens and teenagers. While they still need support from us during this stage, it is in this part of their life that they begin to transfer some of their attachment needs to their peers.

That is why we often feel we are getting the back seat in terms of their 411. When something happens at school that is stressful, they want to call their bestie Lily or Jake instead of telling us. This is part of a normal attachment process.

If we have put in the work to cultivate a secure attachment with them up to this point, they will still bring the really big stuff our way. In two studies on adolescent attachment, the researchers found that securely attached teens who were in car accidents still wanted their mother's comfort over their peers' at the time of incident. When our teens do reach for us, it will likely be in moments where they are *deeply distressed* and need us to sit calmly and caringly with them and focus on listening to their perspective (not changing it or fixing their problem) and showing empathy for what they are feeling.

During adolescence, the ratio of safe haven to secure base starts to weigh heavier on the secure base side of things. The more we can accept that part of our role, the more comfortable they will be coming to us when they truly do need us, because they won't fear hurting our feelings when they bounce back into individuation mode and blow us off for their friends. More on this in Chapter 10 (this page).

Adulthood

The attachment drive stays with us for our entire lifespan. While we are inclined to form new attachment relationships with besties and sweethearts, our parents don't stop being important figures in our lives; rather, they shift in regard to what we need and want from them.

We can still offer them attuned emotional support, but we need to be cognizant of *how they want us* to support them and where they see our place in their ongoing journey.

Though our adult children will have ideally transferred their primary attachment identity to their peers, we will always be their parents. And there will be times in their lives when the primal instinct to reach out for our support will activate and drive them into our care. I will never forget what it felt like to hear George Floyd call out for his mother on the day of his

death in 2020. That primal instinct to seek her as a safe haven was still present in his heart even as a forty-six-year-old adult.

Parenthood

The secure attachment lesson starts in utero, and continues for as long as we live, which means that it also comes into play with how we parent. This is the entire reason it is so important that we learn a secure attachment pattern, because the ways we are relating toour children now will affect the ways they eventually relate to their children (should they choose to have them).

The beauty of attachment is that we can repair and improve our connections to our children no matter if they are still in diapers or diapering their own children. Our children need to know that we are a safe haven and a secure base for them to rely on throughout all the ups and downs that come with every stage of human life.

Review of Attachment Patterns

SECURE babies reach for closeness and then receive soothing and reassurance. Why? Because their parents are consistently attuned, warm, and available to give them comfort and support. It feels good to run into the arms of others and be soothed.

INSECURE-RESISTANT babies reach for closeness and then protest against soothing and reassurance. Why? Because their parents are inconsistent in their supportive responses, so these babies want to keep their eyes on them at all times to prevent emotional or literal abandonment.

INSECURE-AVOIDANT babies avoid closeness and then distract themselves to cope. Why? Because their

parents are consistently unable to offer comfort and support. It feels worse to show distress and experience rejection or intrusion; it's easier to stay buttoned up.

INSECURE-DISORGANIZED babies shut down or become reactive instead of seeking caregivers for support. Why? Because their parents are a source of fear and threat to them. If I am scared of something, but my caregiver is scary too, I have nowhere safe to run.

NERD ALERT: You Are the Prefrontal Cortex

Did you know that babies are born with a more developed limbic system (the part of the brain responsible for sensing threat and danger) and a barely developed prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain responsible for logic, thinking, language, empathy, and meaning-making)? So when a child is young, they are able to feel a ton, but not to think a ton, which is why, as their attachment figures, we function as their prefrontal cortex. They need us to be able to rationalize and see meaning and meet needs while they work on buffing up the thickness of the gray matter in the higher levels of their brain.

When we offer them high warmth, high proximity to us, and high responsiveness to their crying and cooing, we are telling their brain that they are safe keeping the limbic system from having to work as hard to feel safe. Instead, we are telling their brain to send energy toward thickening their prefrontal cortex for more complex learning!

Which is why it is incorrect to think that babies can learn to self-soothe. Babies do not have enough brain development to process emotions, or to even rationalize why we have left the room. They might eventually stop crying, but that won't be because they self-soothed; it will be because they shut off or stopped attempting to reach for us.

If we need to leave a crying baby so that we can self-soothe and take a few breaths in a stressful moment, that is a healthy choice! We can't soothe a baby effectively if we are losing our marbles. A baby left alone for small periods of time crying will not be traumatized from that experience; the key is in the pattern of responsiveness we offer them overall in our relationship.

We do want our children to develop enough brain capacity to process the world in secure ways, and to eventually gain the ability to process through small things without huge emotional reactions. When we soothe our children, we are helping them do exactly that. Psychologist and attachment researcher Rachel Samson →

says it perfectly: "The capacity for self-soothing is born out of hundreds and hundreds of instances of being soothed by someone else."

What we do in response to our children's emotional cries and reaches becomes their internal template for believing (or not believing) that their needs are valid and deserve being met.

Which is why so many people have an internalized voice that pops into their heads when they are upset or tender that tells them to "get over it" or "toughen up" or "stop being so dramatic."

They were given these messages as kids. If they eventually stopped showing their feelings outwardly, they were at least given accolades for being able to self-soothe. Unfortunately what they were really doing was ignoring and numbing their emotions. An avoidant attachment pattern develops.

I see this myth of self-soothing negatively play out in the lives of the avoidantly attached adult clients I have. On the outside, they embody the type of independence the self-soothing myth promises. They don't express their emotions outwardly and rarely ask others for help. They appear soothed and sufficient, but on the inside, they feel lonely, lost, inadequate, and unsure about how to connect with themself, their spouse, their children, etc. They often use substances to numb their emotional states and are ducks on the water, calm on the outside, anxious underneath it all.

When children feel securely attached to caregivers, they are able to trust in the support of those adults and feel safe. This means their brain can spend less time lighting up their amygdala and their safety response centers, and more time focusing on learning and exploration, which helps to develop larger gray matter volume in the bilateral superior temporal sulci, right superior temporal gyrus, right temporoparietal junction, and the bilateral precentral gyri in late childhood (ten to eleven years). Fancy, right? We're not spoiling our babies when we respond to their cries with holding and rocking, we're helping their brain to adaptively develop!

TWO

Connection Is the Most Powerful Form of Influence

The most effective way to influence our children is not to try to control their behavior or choices but to build a deeply connected and attuned relationship with them. When we put in the work to be connected to our children, we develop a kind of trust that makes the process of guiding them through life far easier and more rewarding for us both.

A MINDSET RESET

When a struggling parent comes to me and asks for advice on how to get their child to stop doing something, or to start doing something, my initial advice is not about their child; it's about their mindset.

I encourage any parent caught in a negative cycle with their child (including myself) to pause and spend some serious time understanding the mindsets and mentalities that are driving the *parent's* reactions to the child's behavior. Our expectations and beliefs about our parenting role and about child behavior and emotions are often central driving components of the tensions and gridlocks we experience with our children.

When we intentionally reflect on our parenting mindsets, we are freed up to make changes to how *we* feel, think, and act. Which changes how our children are feeling, thinking, and acting. This mindset reset helps us to be more effective at giving our children what they need to move forward in their growth and maturity process.

The primary mindset shift most of us have to make to give our children a secure attachment to us is a move away from *a control-focused responsibility over* our children toward a *connection-focused responsibility to* our children.

PREGNANT AND BREECHING FOR CONTROL

When I was pregnant with my first child, I was one of those moms who deeply wanted to deliver my baby vaginally, or "naturally," as I called it at the time. I watched the Ricki Lake documentary *The Business of Being Born,* I read all of Ina May Gaskin's books about the miracle of birth, and I was *very* dedicated to the data I had learned about the benefits of my child

peacefully exiting my body through the loving protection of the microbiome of my birth canal.

So, when I found out my first baby was malpositioned and breech at week thirty-six, I put on my vaginal-birth-focused A game and tried everything I could to get him to turn head down. I put frozen peas on the top of my belly and did handstands at the local recreation center. I let my doctors do a procedure called an "external version," where they tried to move him head down by pushing around on top of my pregnant belly. I even burned moxa (a form of mugwort) next to my pinky toes to increase blood flow in hopes that he would get energized and do a flip!

But even while he was still entirely enveloped inside my body, *I did not have control over* him or his journey. He stayed head up, butt down, despite every physical, spiritual, and medical intervention I could muster.

My vision of calmly birthing my son through my birth canal without pain medication was replaced by the reality of a scheduled C-section. When it became clear that there was nothing I could do to give my son and myself the "natural" birth I had envisioned, I had some serious grief to process. I felt guilty that I couldn't give him the "ideal" beginning, and disappointed that I wasn't going to be able to experience labor.

After spending some time grieving and letting go of my initial visions of my son's entrance into the outside world, I realized that this loss came with a gift. I was already learning that even though I was responsible for offering care to my son, I was not in control of what he did. Painful as it was, it was also relieving; I clearly was not going to be calling all the shots.

I know very few birth stories that don't involve *some* element of the unexpected, and I know *zero* parenting stories without it.

If we're not in control of our children, even when they are still wrapped tightly inside of our bodies, then why would we expect ourselves to be in control of them when they are out of our bodies and teething and tantruming in toddlerhood or determined to date that edgy-looking kid from down the street during their adolescence?

If we can accept this fundamental truth, it helps us to focus less on trying to control our children and more on working to create the kind of relationship with them that leads them to trust in us and feel positive about the influence we have in their life.

We can't control who our children are, but we can profoundly influence how they feel about who they are, and how they feel in relationships with

us.

The connection between us and our children is very much ours to shape. While each of our children has their own unique personality and temperament, *we* are the leaders of the relationship between them and us. A secure attachment experience with us acts as a protectant around their hearts and minds as they inevitably encounter pain, struggles, and adversity in life.

The job of a securely attached parent is less about controlling something in them or around them and more about connecting with them deeply, especially when they are in the throes of big feelings or life changes. I have yet to meet a person who has lived a pain-free life (something many well-meaning parents mistakenly believe they are supposed to give their children). I have, however, met many people who have felt *isolated* in their pain because their caregivers were so focused on trying to control their behavior or their future career success that they missed out on the opportunity to connect to their hearts.

When our children inevitably experience pain and suffering, it does not mean we've failed; it means they are human, and that they need our presence and support to help buffer the pain through connection with us. Suffering while in the arms of caring others is far less painful than suffering in isolation.

When we connect with our children in their tender emotional states, we give them the tools they need to regulate their bodies and eventually develop into people with the empathy and interpersonal skills to connect effectively with others.

This may not seem revolutionary at first blush. *Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course, connect with our kids. That's not the hard part. The hard part is getting our children to listen, follow directions, and act appropriately.*

Exactly.

Connection is the key to all of those other things.

WE ARE NOT FLYING THE PLANE

Once our children enter the world outside of the uterus, they are separate and unique beings with their own inner control panels entering an infinitely complex world that will bring them their own specific life story. Despite the fact that we are the legally responsible party until our children reach age eighteen, we will never, *ever* be flying their plane (in control of

them) or have full power over their destination (deciding what happens in their lives).

That does not mean that we do not *influence* and *impact* their ability to fly safely and happily. The way we relate to them affects how prepared they are for flying. The relationship we build with them and the way we interact with them has a mighty big impact on how fueled they are, how tuned their instruments are, and the type of emotional weather that surrounds them as they learn how to fly their plane.

While we are not piloting the plane, our role is still pivotal in their life process.

We are the aviation mechanics.

According to the National Aviation Academy, the role of an aircraft mechanic is to "supervise, manage, perform maintenance, inspections, and repairs on aircraft. It is their top priority to ensure aircraft safety and airworthiness for passenger travel, air cargo and shipping, and much more!"

Yup. That's the right metaphor for the job of a parent. A little less glorious than being a pilot, but required labor for getting a plane airborne. (And if your *Top Gun* dreams just sizzled into disappointment that you are the mechanic and not the pilot, remember that you have your own plane too. Yourself. And you are the pilot of that one!)

In order to help you develop a secure relationship with your children, I am *not* going to try to teach you how to fly your child's plane, because that would be pointless. The cockpit is inside their brain and nervous system, and you can't get in there. Instead, I am going to help you shift your mindset so that you can avoid the detrimental pit of believing that you can control your children.

Repeat after me: *I am not in control of my children. I am not flying their plane, I am the aviation mechanic doing everything I can to ensure that their plane is safety checked, up to date, fueled properly, and given all of the attention it needs to be ready to fly.*

This distinction is so important because when we try to control our children, or believe we *should* have control over them, we operate out of delusion, and that delusion can lead us to utilize crappy control-oriented tools that harm our child and our relationship with them. Things like punishments, threats, bribes, and permissiveness. Instead, when we shift our mindset to be attachment focused, we can stop the cycle of control-

focused relating that we inherited from our family of origin or surrounding cultures.

A control mindset says: *I am in charge of my child's behavior, beliefs, attitudes, and emotional responses and choices.*

A secure attachment mindset says: *I am not in control of my child, but I am in control of my responses to my child.*

We most effectively promote growth in our children by focusing on *our own* behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and emotional availability. By modeling self-control, establishing healthy structures in our lives, and offering loving connection, we help to make their plane as airworthy as possible in the hopes that they will be able to navigate any turbulence or rough weather that comes into their flight path.

When we focus on steering our own planes instead of thinking we should be steering theirs, we are able to prevent some unnecessary relational turbulence and crashes that come from trying to get control over our children.

BEHAVIORISM IS A BARRIER TO SECURE ATTACHMENT

Simply put, modern culture has put too much trust in a behaviorist message of rewards and punishments without first understanding the relational foundation of human development.

In the early 1900s, Watson, Skinner, and Pavlov made conclusions about human beings that deeply influenced how the world thought about child behavior and development. These researchers believed that human behaviors exist primarily in response to environmental conditioning. The widespread belief became this: positive behavior is motivated by reward, and negative behavior is extinguished through consequences and punishments. This philosophy took no credence of the *relational* aspects of human behavior. Nor did the researchers have brain imaging at the time to recognize the unbelievably complex and *social* ways that human beings develop.

Pure behaviorism misleads us to think that it is our job to control our children's behavior and emotional responses to the world using rewards and punishments. A child is whining? Behaviorism tells us to spank them or ignore them to create suffering as a lesson related to their whining. A child is getting good grades? Behaviorism tells us to give them praise or treats so they will continue to perform.

Pure behaviorism gets us stuck focusing on trying to control behavior instead of trying to understand the underlying needs driving it.

This behavioral mentality is why we get hit with a stinky shame bomb when our child melts down in public. “I’m failing as a parent, I’ve lost control over my child.” Or worse, the shame transforms into contempt toward our child. “What is wrong with you? You’re being an embarrassment to me!”

The false oversimplification of the behaviorist model leads parents to conclude that “bad behavior comes from a lack of punishment or consequences.” It doesn’t account for the countless other dynamics that influence a child’s behavior, like:

- How is their brain wired? Are they sensitive? Do they have ADHD or autism?
- What is happening in their life? Are they navigating a chaotic home? Racism? Bullying?
- What developmental stage are they in? Do they have much gray matter in their brain?
- Are they being abused or neglected in any place in their life?
- Have they had enough to eat?
- What kind of empathy, understanding, compassion, and support do they have?
- What is their sensory profile? Are they overstimulated or understimulated?
- Is there an underlying medical condition that hasn’t been addressed?

While punishment *can* influence behavior, it is certainly not the only thing that influences behavior, and using it as a parenting tool has massive consequences to the developing child’s brain and to the security of their attachment with us.

Same with rewards.

While a child’s behavior might change after being offered the stick (punishment) or a carrot (reward), these approaches do not help a child develop the internal self-models they need to feel secure. They may stop or start a behavior in an attempt to please caregivers, but that “good behavior” does not correlate with them experiencing emotional safety, trust, and resilience.

When we focus on behavior alone and try to extinguish it without understanding it, we are telling our children that *what they do* to please us is more important than *what they feel and need* from us.

If you are currently panicking that you picked up a book where someone is going to tell you to let your children run the zoo, don't worry! We can have our cake (secure, loving connections to our children) and eat it too (by helping them learn pro-social behavior and coping)! More on how to establish that through consistent structure in Chapter 6 (this page).

COMPLIANCE VS INDULGENCE VS COOPERATION

Being a parent is so much practical work. The dressing, the cooking, the cleaning up messes, the school email onslaught, the playdates, the homework, the boundary setting, the medical appointments, the endless requests for snacks or gas or rides to the mall.

It is truly a feat of incredible labor.

Which is why it can be so tempting to slip into the role of dictator.

At least, for me, it is.

I can get so full of all the to-dos that I move into a control-focused mindset with my kids. This is never fun. Not for me, not for them. My son very accurately refers to this as my "harsh mom" mood. It happens when I am so lost in the impossible act of keeping all the plates in the air that I enter into this taskmaster persona where I expect everyone to comply with my requests immediately so that the insane machine of modern life can keep chugging along at Mach 10 speed.

But yelling marching orders at my children will not help them learn to be responsible; it only teaches them to watch out for "harsh mom." When I sense that my inner dictator has taken over, I feel guilty and then compelled to switch into "indulgent mom" mode instead. Unfortunately, when we break our boundaries and authorize changes to expectations, we then have to labor later to reestablish the boundary or schedule, putting us back into a state of frustration or stress with our children.

I don't actually want my children to be mini-soldiers who comply with my every wish with immediate compliance and a salute. I want them to know they *have a voice with me,* and I want them to feel their *needs and preferences matter to me.*

I also don't want my children to be mini-dictators who think I should comply with their every wish with immediate compliance and a salute. I want them to know that there are clear limits and expectations set up to

help keep them safe and healthy and able to get along well with others in the world.

Which means what I want is not control over my children, or to hand over control to my children, but instead, for us all to learn how to be cooperative together.

But how? How do we get our children to cooperate with us? Well, like everything else, it starts with us. We have to model it. And keep our expectations developmentally appropriate.

We need to check ourselves when we move into a control mode and are expecting compliance without giving any connection or consideration to them first. At this realization, we need to stop and breathe and calm our own mind and body so that we can shift into a connection-focused mode to get back in sync with our children.

This is easiest in moments where all of our children are also calm. Turn the volume up on their crying or tantruming or badgering, and we are far more likely to slip into feeling out of control, which is the trigger for the inner dictator or indulgent servant.

I stop and remind myself that no spinning plate is worth damaging the plates I care most about in the world: my relationships with my children.

> **PARENTING PERSPECTIVE**
>
> **Generational Healing**
>
> As the child of a Filipino mother with capital T trauma who immigrated to the US when I was three, it was never acceptable for me to share my big emotions. As the eldest female sibling in an Asian family I was expected to be responsible, quiet, and accommodating to the needs of others. I could not ever question authority and even when I was an adult and trying to heal myself, I was also not allowed to ask questions about my past because that story was too painful for my mom to revisit.
>
> I don't blame my mom for how she parented me, I know she did her best. But I also know that I felt alone and confused through many seasons of my growing up and I want my child to experience a secure connection with me and be able to share his thoughts and feelings without being seen as disrespectful.
>
> —K. J. ALTHOFF, parenting coach, conscious parent, boy mom

TEACHING COOPERATIVE MINDSETS

In the long run, we want our children to be able to consider the needs of others as well as their own needs. To learn the dance of emotional giving and receiving so that they can take care of the people they love and also be taken care of by them.

Cooperation is learned for our children by hearing a clear message from us that everyone's emotions and needs matter, *and* that some needs have to be prioritized before others for the sake of health, safety, and organization. We will not always be able to meet all requests, but we will do our best to at least consider and understand them with compassion.

A cooperative environment is led by grown-ups who are able to be reasonably flexible and also reasonably consistent.

Cooperation happens when we are staying calm, emotionally attuned, and compassionate toward what everyone is feeling and needing.

Cooperative Mindsets in a Real-Life Scenario

Let's say a child is refusing to brush their teeth:

A compliance mindset comes in and says, "I am the boss. You have to brush your teeth. Because *I* said so."

Then, when the child continues to resist teeth brushing, the compliance mindset abandons us to using disconnecting tactics: yelling, threats, shame, punishment, etc.

An indulgent mindset comes in and says: "Will you please brush your teeth?" If the child says no, indulgence leaves us with bribing them or letting them neglect their dental hygiene. It hands over decision-making power to a child.

This creates a nebulous sense of boundaries, which is confusing to a child and leads them to protest boundaries with more vigor and dysregulation.

A cooperative mindset would come into that same situation and say, "Brushing our teeth is important because it helps us prevent sugar bugs and cavities. It is a habit I am going to help you learn so that your teeth can stay strong and healthy. We do it two times a day."

Depending on how old the child is and how badly they hate brushing their teeth, that approach alone might work. But if the child continues to push back, the cooperation process can still go forward without desperate measures for control.

The parent gets curious about what is bothering the child in particular. Is there a sensory issue? Is the child overtired and not processing logically anymore for the night? The parent can get creative in recognizing ways to brush teeth that might make it easier. Does the toothpaste taste gross? (Have you ever tried kids' toothpaste flavors? Some are truly gag-worthy!)

Calm problem-solving and compassion are the primary tools of cooperation.

A parent with a cooperation-focused mentality understands that sometimes it is hard for children to get on board with expectations, and that there is a way to compassionately and creatively help them get through the task. The parent pivots to: "Brushing our teeth is important and can be fun too." Maybe the parent pretends to be a mama tiger brushing her cub's teeth, or lets the child brush her teeth at the same time to get some giggles and cooperation juice.

The child still learns that the parent is going to hold expectations and boundaries (we are going to brush our teeth), but that they will do so in a way that does not harm the relationship (I am going to calmly and compassionately help you do it).

Cooperation is less about "I'm in charge" and more about "I'm here to help you." *Secure parenting is not a battle between wills; it is a meeting of hearts and minds.*

Tips and Scripts for Using Connection to Encourage Cooperation

INFANT/BABY TIP: You cannot control when or how intensely your baby cries (the primary thing babies do that triggers our desire for control). You can, however, control how responsive and calm you are with them. Focus less on trying to stop the crying and more on communicating that you feel them and are there with them.

INFANT/BABY SCRIPTS:

"I'm here."

"I hear you."

"I'm sorry you're upset/scared/sad/hurt."

TODDLER TIP: Toddlers are in the middle of a massive brain leap and are prone to humongous mood swings and getting deeply upset about seemingly small things. It's typical and it is not permanent. Model staying

calm and compassionate while maintaining structure. Make structure easy to remember using visuals and songs.

TODDLER SCRIPTS:

"This feels hard for you."

"I see your pain."

"We need to do X, but I can hold you first, if that will help?"

"Let's act like lions while [insert act here]!"

PRESCHOOL TIP: Preschoolers are entering the world of social negotiation and often "try out" sassy and defiant responses. Don't overreact in kind. Simply redirect them to the phrases that will help their voice get heard and be respectful in reminding them about whatever expectations they might be challenging.

PRESCHOOL SCRIPTS:

"We can do it together."

"You can choose which shoes you want to wear, but we do need to have shoes on before we leave."

"I can see this is really frustrating right now."

"Do you want some space and time alone?"

"I will always be here to hug you when you want me to."

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TIP: Six- to ten-year-olds are in a brain stage where they are able to absorb (and still trust) education as intervention. If you are trying to gain cooperation on a task, think about what other sources of information you could bring in to help them understand the *why* behind the *what.*

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SCRIPTS:

"I love that you are asking questions, and scientists have asked the same question and found an answer. Would you like me to explain how I know this?"

"I can't let you do that because the consequences are too risky or big to take a chance."

"I have a strong reason I am asking you to do this, but you seem to have a strong reason you don't think you should. I want to understand your perspective first, then I will share some with you about mine."

MIDDLE SCHOOL TIP: Middle school kids are in the throes of great hormonal and social change. They are often picking up and mirroring things that their peers are doing and saying. Instead of pushing back hard when those things are inappropriate, try understanding what they think they mean and then discussing what an adult might think or feel when they say or do it.

MIDDLE SCHOOL SCRIPTS:

"Hm. I may have a different idea of what that phrase means. What do you think it means?"

"I can see you are trying on some new styles these days. Can you share a bit with me what's normal and cool from your perspective?"

"I love that you are exploring so many new friendships and getting to know new people. That's super brave. I am here if you have any questions about how to handle old and new friendships at the same time."

HIGH SCHOOL TIP: Teenagers are practice grown-ups. While they are gaining independence, it is important that we allow them a chance to make some of their own mistakes and successes. This is scary for us, but important for their development. Our role is less about making decisions for them and more about helping them make their own decisions at this stage. We can still have our own boundaries. (For example, "You can only drive my car if you are sober, and any violation of that boundary will result in loss of the privilege.")

HIGH SCHOOL SCRIPTS:

"It is so amazing to see you at this stage of life where you are ready to start making some of your own decisions. I fully believe in you."

"I love when I get time with you, and I love watching you launch out into the world with so many new and exciting friendships alongside you!"

"I know you can handle so much on your own now, but I want you to also know that, for whatever big or small thing that you need from me, I am always here for you still."

COMPLIANCE/ DOMINANCE-BASED APPROACH	INDULGENCE/PACIFICATION-BASED APPROACH	COOPERATION-BASED APPROACH
Prioritizes obedience and control	Prioritizes harmony	Prioritizes relationship and growth
Says, “I’m the boss”	Says, “Whatever you want”	Says, “I’ve got you”
Uses fear, shame, guilt, dominance, and violence	Uses bribes	Uses empathy, consistency, playfulness, communication, and structure
Creates emotional distancing	Creates emotional enmeshment	Creates emotional resiliency
Teaches power is more important than compassion	Teaches entitlement and soothing through consumption	Teaches that a parent is a reliable place to find care and guidance
Kids learn to hide their misbehavior	Kids learn that their misbehavior is effective	Kids learn how to understand their behavior and make changes

LIAR, LIAR

It can feel incredibly triggering when our children lie to us. Especially if we have ever experienced the abuse of someone in our past who chronically or pathologically betrayed us through deceptions.

But that does not change the fact that lying is a part of every child’s development, and that honesty is a complex skill that takes courage and maturity. It is our job to stay calm and reflect when we have caught our

children in a lie. Why are they lying? What help do they need from me to make an honest choice instead?

Lying comes from many different motivations, some of them even altruistic. (Anyone else ever given a compliment on a haircut that you internally found less-than-stylish?) Children almost never lie out of intent to harm; usually it is to protect themselves, someone else, or something else that they love. Dishonesty in our children does not mean they are bad or headed down a bad path, it means they are immature, and need our help to learn the path of honesty.

If we want our children to be honest, we need to do the following things:

- Model honesty and own up when we make mistakes without shaming ourselves or acting defensive.
- Create a relational environment where honesty and vulnerability are celebrated and seen as courageous.
- Refrain from harsh punishments or shaming approaches so that our children feel emotionally and physically safe to tell the truth about hard things.
- Heal our own anxiety or reactivity so that our children can rely on us to be calm and clearheaded when they share tender or vulnerable truths.

When our children lie to us, it is an opportunity to learn more about them and what they need by gently inviting them to share their underlying truth. “Hey kid, I actually saw what happened and I am guessing you lied because you feel embarrassed or scared and I understand that. But you are safe with me and we will figure this out. I got you. Can you try again telling me what happened, but this time share the whole story, even the hard parts?”

Honesty thrives in environments where it is clear we are accepted and supported even in our worst moments.

RELATIONAL TRUST = COOPERATION PIXIE DUST

Imagine the worst teacher you ever had. The one who didn’t like you or notice you or care about your well-being. Remember how they treated you? My guess is that this teacher was behaviorally focused. They cared more about you *behaving for them* than *your development.* Do you remember much of the content they tried to teach you? Unlikely. Would you seek their support in a crisis when you genuinely need help? Hell no.

The absence of care and connection in a relationship creates an absence of learning and development in us.

Now, imagine your favorite teacher of all time. This teacher probably still had expectations, but you could feel that the expectations were rooted in this teacher's desire to help you grow, not to wield power over you. Compare that learning process to that of a teacher you didn't like; it was completely different, right? Why? Because they put in the effort to genuinely connect with you.

For me, that teacher was Ms. Willy. Ms. Willy was a biology teacher and one of the most genuine, caring people on Earth. When I walked into her classroom, she would call me up to her desk and give me a compliment on my style or check in with me about some high school drama I had shared with her in a previous conversation.

As a fifteen-year-old, I was more concerned with high school romance sagas and getting elected to student council than I was with my science grades, but in Ms. Willy's biology class, *I paid attention.* She was working hard to connect with me, so I wanted to work hard to listen closely as she described the role of the mitochondria. (The powerhouse of the cell! See, I still remember!)

When we can tell that someone cares for our *inner world* and *well-being* as much as our outer performance and compliance, it makes it much easier to learn from them.

In the quest to build secure attachment dynamics with our children, the question is not: "How do we get our children to behave?" (control). It's: "How do we connect with our children in both joy and struggle in such a meaningful way that they instinctively trust us when we are guiding them?" (connection).

COMPASSION IS A BETTER TEACHER THAN PUNISHMENT

Has anyone else here ever done something regretful when you felt mad or hurt?

Take a minute and think about it. What was happening to you, around you, inside of you? What did you need practically? What did you need relationally?

Did you need someone to give you more pain to help you learn a lesson?

Or did you need someone to be more mature than you and to take the time to offer you compassionate understanding and nonreactive guidance?

Have I lost my cool during an emotional moment as a grown-up with a fully formed prefrontal cortex? You betcha I have. Was it because I hadn't been rewarded or punished enough? Nope. It was because I was struggling. My nervous system was out of whack as a result of things I was going through.

Most of the time, when we act badly, it's because we are physically dysregulated, and we've been punished by life circumstances too much already.

A few years back, we went through a hellish time while we were trying to have a second child. There were multiple miscarriages, infertility, and several surgeries. It was heartbreaking and tiring, and my body and emotional systems were fried.

NERD ALERT: Reflective Functioning

Did you know that our ability to reflect on why our children are doing something (or not doing something, as is often the case with chores and gentle hands, and returning home before curfew) has a huge impact on how securely they develop?

When we can pause and try to imagine the relatable reasons behind a behavior or emotional state, it helps us to develop a more secure connection with our children.

That is the first part of a fancy schmancy term the researchers use called "reflective functioning." The other part of reflective functioning lies in our ability to understand why we feel the ways we feel and react the ways we react.

When we take the time to reflect on both our children's underlying needs and states, and our own underlying needs and states, it helps everyone to be more secure.

HOW DOES THIS WORK?

- When our children are doing things or feeling things, and we take the time to reflect on what lies beneath their behavior, we are taking the time to wonder about the various things that they might be feeling, thinking, learning, etc. This helps us build compassion and clear paths for meeting needs related to their behavior or emotional state.

- When we also take the time to reflect on what lies beneath our reactions to their behavior or feelings, it helps us to stay more regulated and less reactive. What messages did we receive as a kid about this type of behavior or emotional state? What is going on in our present life that might be affecting us?

The higher our capacity for reflective functioning, the more likely we are to offer calm and secure responses to our children that help them feel connected and supported.

On one bad day in particular, we had just discovered that we had experienced a second consecutive miscarriage. After the nightmarish ultrasound, where we confirmed that the heartbeat was gone, my sweet husband suggested that we go take a walk around a local lake to process and grieve together. The lake is at a state park and requires you to pay each time you visit, so we always buy a season pass to save money.

When we pulled through the pass-holder lane that day and the teenager at the kiosk waved us down to stop, I was confused and annoyed. I really didn't want to have to interact with *any* human being on planet Earth besides my husband at that exact moment. She then proceeded to haughtily scold us for using scotch tape to adhere our pass to the windshield. I had attached it with tape instead of using the adhesive on the back of the pass because I didn't want to go through the futile hours-long labor of removing the cement-like sticky paste off my windshield at the end of year as I had done the previous two years. It's hard enough as a parent to find time to remove trash from my car, let alone to set aside several hours for toxic-goo removal.

After she finished telling us that it was against the rules to tape our passes, I lost my shit on her. I did this gross and yucky posturing thing where I made myself intimidating and dominant and put her in her place. I defended my tape use and then belittled her for her attempt to insinuate we were doing something shady. Then I drove off without giving her a chance to reply or wield any more of her adolescent authority over me and my taped-on park pass.

For those of you thinking "Karen moment," you're not wrong. It was not a reaction I am proud of. I was deeply dysregulated, and my ability to make conscious choices was somewhere between nil and nada.

I was thirty-six years old at the time. I am venturing to guess that she had only recently gotten her driver's license. *There is no question that my*

behavior was problematic. I had violated a rule (albeit one I didn't know about), and instead of accepting the limit and taking accountability, I came unglued.

Did I need punishment to learn?

If a park ranger had come and given me a ticket for disorderly conduct, or if the park had taken away my pass, it would not have changed the fact that I was grieving my lost babies and had little to no bandwidth for things not going as planned. I was profoundly sad and disoriented, and it was that feeling of powerlessness that led to my out-of-character behavior.

As we pulled up near the lake past the kiosk, my husband gently put his hand on my leg and said, "I am so sorry that we lost another baby, I know how devastated you are, and I am really sad too." I burst into tears and cried in his arms until his shirt was sufficiently covered in mascara and snot. I heave-cried. The kind of crying where it feels like your spleen might actually arise out of your chest and fall onto the floor. I eventually found my breath. My sweet husband had understood that my reaction earlier was about how sad and powerless I felt, not due to some lack of behavioral conditioning.

After connecting with him, I felt better in a way that helped me to see how unfair my reaction at the kiosk had been. I felt less alone in my ache and grief, which helped my head to clear. It didn't make all my pain go away, but it did, in that moment, make it feel manageable, which gave me the insight to feel remorse for my Karen-style temper tantrum.

I recognized that I needed to apologize to her on the way out of the park.

Unfortunately, by the time we left the lake, she had gotten off her shift, so I never got to make things right between me and her. But the empathy my husband gave me bloomed into empathy for that little blonde park elf who was just doing her job to try to stop miscreants from abusing their pass privileges. And in the seven-ish years that have passed since that day, I haven't reacted to anyone else with that kind of incredulity.

I may have *deserved* a consequence, but it wasn't what I *needed in order to do better.* I needed my husband's compassionate intervention and genuine empathy to help me unlock my underlying grief so that I could reconnect with my resilience and return to acting like a civilized adult.

When a toddler steals a toy from another child, we can return the toy and offer compassion to our child about how painful it is to want something that someone else has. When we teach a toddler about their

emotional state, it helps them to learn how to identify it, which, in turn, leads them closer to learning how to manage it and, then, how to communicate it.

When an elementary-school-age child says something mean in retaliation for a mean comment said to them, we can turn to them and say, "That really, really hurt you when they said that to you. I'm so sorry they did," and then offer a nurturing hug or facial expression to help melt their defensiveness into grief and pain processing. Then, when they have released their pain, we can offer them some support in repairing their part and considering what they can do the next time they are hurt in that way.

When a teenager comes home from school and gives us an attitude about what is for dinner, instead of demanding respect or shaming them for their tone, we can melt a bit, and say, "You okay, kid?" And even if they stay crispy, we can remain open, remembering what it was like to be in a teenage body with constantly rolling hormones and ever-shifting social dynamics playing out in our heads.

Compassion is not permissiveness.

It's *effective relational intervention.* Being seen for the *why* underneath our behavior and the human triggers driving it is one of the most powerful tools of transformation anyone can be offered. Good behavior is not the primary goal of secure parenting. It is a by-product of the true primary goal: cultivating meaningful relationships with our children. All of us feel better, and therefore behave better, when we have securely attached relationships to rely on.

HIGH STRUCTURE, HIGH NURTURE

One of my all-time psychology heroes, Dr. Karyn Purvis, describes a secure attachment parenting strategy using only these four words:

"High structure, high nurture."

This describes the ideal combination of a safe and predictable environment and culture (structure), and a deeply caring and responsive relationship (nurture).

This is the heart of cooperative secure parenting. We are not trying to control our children, nor are we neglecting to guide them and teach them. We are connecting deeply with them as we show them the ropes.

Let me give you an example. Let's say your children are still youngish and you are at a fast-food restaurant that has a playground. You make sure all of your children eat lunch before sending them to run off some

afternoon energy in the play area. You pull up your work email to try to get something done, and then think, "Who am I kidding, I'll never get through a whole email," so you start scrolling Instagram instead. After a grand total of three minutes of social media mind-numbing, you hear a bloodcurdling scream.

You look up and see that your almost three-year-old is engaged in what appears to be hand-to-hand combat with another small human just below the slide. Your child is currently winning the battle, with their hand firmly around the ponytail of what appears to be a mini-MMA-fighter with curly dark hair and a strong left hook.

Here's how the three mindsets would enter the situation:

Control-Based Parenting

You rush into the scene with a booming voice and a domineering stature, and you use your child's full name: "Ryan Archer Betty Dingo, you get your hands off that child's ponytail right this minute." To make your power known, you grab your child by the arm and drag them out into the public area for a little medieval humiliation. "If you don't stop acting out, we are *never* coming here again!" (Which you know is probably an empty threat but hope it is an effectively scary one nonetheless.)

They cry/scream/kick and try to tell you what they are upset about, and you continue to focus on their lack of obedience. You have told them a million times before to keep their hands to themselves. Instead of calming down, your child starts to take on the sound of a wounded pterodactyl.

Your child is wailing at unreachable decibels, and your ears feel like they might explode. You square off above your child, and with your most shaming and intimidating voice, you say: "If you keep acting like a spoiled little brat, you are going to spend the rest of the day in your room by yourself."

Your child looks at you with a pained face and then proceeds to deflate. The wailing stops, but a despondent slump comes over your child's body. You feel victorious for about one nanosecond. Then you absorb their downtrodden spirit and feel guilty as hell. Sigh. You pray that this is the last time you have to go through this battle and cross every finger and toe on your body in hopes that your child has finally learned their lesson and won't put their hands on anyone ever again. (Which, of course, given the fact that they just turned three and are highly sensory seeking, is entirely unlikely.)

Indulgence-Based Parenting

You run to the scene with great concern and panic. You didn't see what happened exactly, but you don't want your child to feel any pain or shame. You step in the middle of the ring and awkwardly avoid the gaze of the other parents in the room and turn to your child and say, "Ryan, darling, let's go get some candy from Mommy's purse." You quickly stuff your child's mouth full of high-fructose corn syrup and try to distract him from the other child. You then proceed to bribe Ryan to leave the restaurant as quickly as possible in order to avoid whatever responsibility you and your child might have for a large missing tuft of hair on the mini-MMA-fighter.

You get in the car and hand your child their tablet and a lemonade that you had bought for yourself so that everyone can calm down and move on. You hope that you never encounter those particular people again anywhere in the fast-food nation and feel relieved not to be in a tense situation anymore.

You reassure yourself that kids will be kids, and that they just weren't getting along with that particular child. No harm done. No lessons that need to be learned.

Secure Attachment-Based Parenting

You enter the room with a calm but firm presence and speak directly to the situation. "Whoa, guys, it looks like you are having a hard time controlling your hands and feelings, we need to take a break. Ryan, come with me over to this corner and let me help you figure out what happened and how we can make it right." It takes reiterating this sentence a few times for their little hijacked brains to recognize words, but Ryan does walk into your arms so you can pick them up. If they weren't able to go with you willingly? You'd calmly pick them up while they flailed their tiny but mighty body until you could get somewhere contained and separate.

Once you have safely ended the ninja fight, and removed Ryan to a different spot, you use a caring voice and try to understand their perspective. "What happened, kiddo?" Ryan shares that the little ninja had been trying to walk up the slide at the same time that they were trying to go down the slide. This is a lesson that took Ryan at least a year to learn, so they are very rigid about other children following the rule as well. "Slides are for going *down,* remember, Mom?"

"I do remember. Sounds like it was really upsetting to you to see another kid not following the rules. Did you ask nicely at first?" Ryan tells you that they did (which maybe they did or maybe they didn't, the jury is

out on that one). Then you help Ryan understand what they were feeling when the mini-MMA-fighter didn't follow the rules and move out of the way. "That must have made you feel very frustrated and even angry."

"Yes! She wasn't listening to me!"

You respond with empathy: "I hate it when people ignore me too, that feels awful." Next time you are feeling that upset, I want you to ask for my help, okay?"

Ryan nods. "Okay."

"It is hard to resolve conflict, kid. Even adults have a hard time with it. Even me sometimes."

"Really?" they say. "Even you?"

"Oh yeah," you say. "Even me. But what I've learned is that if you stay patient and keep using your words, you can solve almost anything. What words do you want to use to share with the little ninja over there?"

"I want to tell her it made me mad that she was breaking the rules and not listening to me when I asked her to move."

You add empathy: "That hurt you. I am also guessing it hurt her when you pulled her hair in response? Can I help you repair that with her?"

You then help Ryan use their words with the other child and come to a different outcome.

Ryan experiences empathy from you, which makes you feel connected to them and them to you. It also helps prevent a shame spiral and bolsters Ryan's motivation to try to redo their earlier behavior. Second chances build confidence and competence. The day isn't ruined, and your child learned more than one lesson.

They learned that their feelings matter. They learned that other people's feelings matter, and they learned how to repair a bad choice and make a better one.

Didn't that last little story sit better with the way you would want someone to help you?

Did it also feel much more complicated than the two earlier approaches?

You are not alone. When we witness a calm and connected parent navigating a conflict situation, it can feel like watching Julia Child prepare a fourteen-step, day-long beef bourguignon. By the time she is at the fourth step, you are still trying to digest the first one…"What am I supposed to

say? How do I say it? What do I say first? What was that word she used? *Do I brown the beef before or after I add the second set of onions?*" The process of being/staying connected to our children in challenging moments is truly *work.*

This is why we often give up on the incredible French stew and opt for the microwaveable-meal parenting strategies. Pounding down a child's will or giving in to their every whim are quick and easy "solutions" that bring a situation to an end. Yell and threaten until your child deflates and submits. Hand over the ice cream until your child stops yelling and threatening you. Done. Is it nutritious? Nope. But it sure as heck doesn't take as long to make.

While we *all* can relate to the instincts to pound down or to give in, we all benefit far more when we take the time to co-regulate and work toward cooperation. Cooperation takes longer to teach, but it comes with very few side effects, and promotes an intact secure attachment pattern between us and our children.

CONNECTION IS A NEED, NOT A REWARD

When I hear someone say something like, "Don't hug your child when they have been bad, it will only reward them for their bad behavior," I seriously consider pulling out my left eyebrow. This "logic," which is still pervasive in our culture, is contrary to the interpersonal neuroscience research we have on brain development.

Offering support is one of the most important things we can do for our child when they are in a moment of struggle. Our children do not have the brain development necessary to manage huge floods of emotion without co-regulation from the nervous systems of mature adults. If we shut them down or leave them to "figure it out themselves," they won't be able to learn about their emotional responses or trust in us as a secure home base, which will make it harder for them to emotionally mature in the future.

"But, Eli, what if they are hitting or screaming or swearing at us? Wouldn't it be rewarding those bad behaviors to respond with compassion? Doesn't that just teach them to do those things more in order to get care from us?" Great question. No, it does not. It teaches them that they have a safe haven in our arms, even when they are struggling emotionally and responding with immature behavior.

It's important that we all remember how awful it feels to be in that type of emotionally flooded state of mind and body. No one wants to feel that upset. It literally hurts. Our children and teens are not actually processing

or learning much *at all* in those moments. They are flailing. When we respond to them with calm compassion, we are helping to soothe their brain, which then helps them to regulate so they *can* process and think. In emotional dysregulation, we all tend to lose our grip a bit, and if we withhold connection as a way to "teach" our children, they experience rejection from us and will be more inclined to explode further or to start to lick their wounds in isolation without our help.

When children feel cared for in their challenging emotions and behavior, we are not rewarding the negative behavior, we are helping them to feel safe and calm. Which, in turn, helps them to access the part of the brain that rationalizes, making it easier for them to process what triggered the behavior and learn positive alternatives to coping with that trigger.

In a similar vein, I want to pull my right eyebrow out when I hear someone saying something like, "If you're a good girl and don't cry, I will let you have an ice-cream sandwich at home later." A child may stop crying to get the ice cream, but she has also internalized the message that she is being "good" when she buries her emotions. She is hearing: "Your cries are too much for me. Keep them inside, and I will offer you ways to numb yourself."

As our children grow, they become more aware of what we feel and want from them. If they sense that what we want is *good behavior* instead of *authentic connection,* it muddies the waters of trust.

They will share and show less of their emotional tenderness. We will not have the honor of true emotional closeness with them.

I want to take this moment to acknowledge that our children crying can be profoundly agitating. Sometimes a cry/whine/scream fest goes viral in my house or, more often, in my car, and all three of my children are actively breaking my brain at around 18,983,758 decibels. I. Do. Not. Love. That. It grates on my ears and my nervous system gets heightened and I want the noises to cease. Immediately.

But that discomfort has a purpose. Our children's distressing cues are biologically meant to get us upset so that we are motivated to mobilize quickly and help protect them from danger. It does not feel "good" when our kids and teens are upset, even if the upset is tender and quiet. *But* it is the design. We are the co-regulation station they are meant to hook into in order to let out their painful feelings so that they can regain composure and get what they need.

When our children are calm and collected, we can, by all means, enjoy those moments and use them as opportunities to bond through playfulness and regulated engagement, but we still do not want to send the message that these are the only "good" parts of our children. The parts that reach for us when they are crying or express big anger when they are overwhelmed —those parts are good too. Those parts are young and learning and working to develop a deep sense of self while they process the unbelievably complex experience of being a human child.

Story Time: Rewards and Achievement

When I first met Jacob, he was brought into my therapy office after revealing to his family that he was seriously struggling to the point of suicidal ideation. His family was flabbergasted. This kid was successful on all external markers. He was good-looking, kind to others, had troves of friends, always won awards, and was top of his class and captain of all of his sporting endeavors.

On the outside, his family looked this way too. Striving for success and rewards was their jam. Jacob had followed his family pattern and focused on getting rewards not only to feel good but to "be" good. But instead of feeling rewarded, he felt trapped to perform perfectly and punished himself whenever he fell short of perfection.

This family understood very clearly what positive external behavior looked like. They knew how to set up behavioral expectations and to follow those expectations themselves. But what they did not know how to do was to enter into vulnerable emotional states together.

Jacob's parents had both come from homes with significant trauma. Alcoholism, abuse, and mental illness. But neither had ever had the chance to do the emotional work of healing their traumatic childhoods. Instead, they did what they had done since they were little: they focused their energy on achievements and encouraged their children to do the same.

From a young age, Jacob learned that his parents got very excited when he achieved and performed.

Impress a family friend at dinner with his polite manners and helpfulness in washing the dishes? Get positive feedback and maybe an extra hour of television on the weekend.

Get an A on a history exam? Get rewarded with an hour extended on his curfew.

Eat all of his vegetables on his plate? Get rewarded with dessert.

Keep your room clean all week long? Get rewarded with a sleepover at a friend's house.

The message was: "Be good." The good behavior that resulted from this rewards structure was unfortunately not coupled with a quality attachment experience for Jacob. Jacob was a highly sensitive kid who could sense that his parents were uncomfortable with feelings, so he naturally came to conclude that something was wrong with him for having so many of them.

One day, Jacob came into a session looking more dysregulated than previous visits. His shoulders were slumped, his eyes were downcast, and his gait was slower. I looked at him, and before he even had a chance to greet me, I said: "Hey, kid, you don't look like you're feeling so hot."

He looked at me in pure shock and said, "How did you know that?" and then crawled onto the couch in my office and wrapped his six-foot-three body into a roly-poly position with his eyes closed.

I said: "I could feel it."

He started to cry. A muffled, uncomfortable version of crying, where it was clear he didn't know how to fully surrender to the tears and release his pain. After a good few minutes of letting it out as best he could, he started to find his words.

"Today sucked. Everything that could have gone wrong at school went wrong. And the entire day, my stomach was in knots and I could hardly get enough air to breathe. When I got home from school, I just wanted to go upstairs to my room to sleep, so when I kicked off my shoes, I honestly didn't even think about putting them into the closet."

"Makes sense," I said. "When I'm that wrecked, I don't think about my shoe placement either."

Jacob scoffed. "Not how my dad feels about it apparently. When he got home an hour later, he came right up to my room and ripped me a new one. He told me that he was disappointed in me for being so inconsiderate that he had almost tripped over my shoes and could have gotten seriously hurt. 'You'll need to show me you can do better if you want me to get you those Air Jordans we talked about last week.'

"He didn't ask me how I was, or even think about why I was lying in my bed at five p.m. on a Wednesday. He cares more about having his perfectly ordered house than he does about the fact that I feel like absolute shit."

"You needed him to see you, notice you, feel your pain, and help you not feel so alone in it. What did you say back to him?"

"What I always say: 'Okay, I will.' He was satisfied and went out of the room to find my mom and ask what she was making for dinner. That bugs me too; it's like he only cares about what we do for him but doesn't stop to think that we could have other things going on, even my mom."

This kid had all the rewards life could offer, but he was missing the most rewarding thing of all, a secure, authentic connection to his parents. And despite being rewarded and praised into positive behavior for all of those years, his insides were aching and his confidence was lacking because he felt that only the performative parts of himself were lovable. His messy shoe-flinging parts did not feel loved, they felt like improvement projects.

I called his parents in for a session the next day and helped them understand how deeply desperate Jacob was for authentic, true connection with them and how their attempts to help him thrive through behavior had been internalized by him as conditional love, even though I knew that they didn't mean to make him feel that way.

Luckily for Jacob, his parents were willing to put in the work.

As they recognized that their own parents focused on behavior and not connection, they each started to unravel their own stories of pain and isolation in childhood. This process helped them to soften to Jacob and focus less on what he was achieving (and rewarding that) and more on how he was doing (and offering him the gift of supportive care and receptivity).

A year later, when we were closing up our treatment together, I asked Jacob why he thought he was doing better, and this is what he said:

"I guess I am not so worried about getting it all right. I know they want to be there for me, even when I'm in a hard place or f-ing something up. I feel like my parents really stopped caring as much about us all looking put together."

Rewards are a great part of life, but their existence in the parent-child dynamic *as a mechanism to control behavior* is not actually rewarding, because when we reward a child for acting the way we want them to, it only teaches them how to perform for us instead of guiding them through an authentic and complex expression of self.

ARE THEY OUT OF CONTROL, OR ARE WE TRIGGERED AND FEELING OUT OF CONTROL

OURSELVES?

When my husband and I were navigating a flood of pain and loss during our miscarriage and infertility season, our son had to navigate a different version of his parents than he had known before. The tone in our home had changed. His generally jovial and generous parents were sad often and had shorter fuses. His excitement over possible siblings had been let down multiple times, and he was bearing witness to all sorts of medical shenanigans, including his mother recovering from surgeries and both his parents trying to manage their emotional pain.

Despite the fact that we did our very best not to burden him with our pain, he could sense it, and it was, of course, affecting him.

We were still mostly available to him, and we did our best to make space for him to feel his feelings and to join him in the joy and play of the life of a two-and-a-half- to four-year-old. But it was a long season. And at the end of that long season? We got pregnant, which meant now he had a very sick pregnant mama who puked every day for three full trimesters and often had to go to bed before he did.

At the end of that pregnancy? Twin sisters arrived. One with a medical condition that needed extra attention. Having one new sibling arrive as a firstborn only child is a big transition. Having two arrive at the same time? It's quite a shock to the system.

And then, just to make things comical, what happened three months after his sisters were born? A gorshdarn global pandemic.

Who wants to guess which direction my son's behavior started going?

Yup. Downhill. More meltdowns, more demands, more hitting his cousins and sisters and parents when things didn't go as planned or as he wished. Little man was maxed out. And so were we. Our previous secure attachment dance of connection morphed into a survival march. We trudged forward, trying to get him to make good choices and getting increasingly exacerbated at him when he didn't.

He was experiencing a new volume of: "Not now," "No," "Not yet," "After your sister's feed," "Please wait," etc. Which is the equivalent of dungeon torture for a extroverted five-year-old in quarantine.

His ability to tolerate, "No, you cannot watch another show," went down about fifteen notches. His emotions were so tremendous that when we said no, he acted as if he had never heard the word before. Screaming. Legs flailing, tears sailing everywhere. It was exhausting.

It wasn't until a family member insinuated that we weren't being hard enough on him that we stopped to do an inventory of our connections with him. We both recognized how disconnected and behavioral our parenting had gotten. Our family was right to be concerned but wrong to think the issue was the absence of negative behavioral conditioning. There was plenty of negative conditioning in his world. The problem was he wasn't getting the attuned, compassionate connection he needed and was instead getting more and more of the Pavlov treatment.

In our own survival mode, we had gotten out of sync with my son.

After recognizing our disconnection, we knew we had to make a U-turn back to a rhythm that we had lost. We started paying more attention to his emotional state and taking the time to acknowledge it and offering him comfort and support. We still didn't offer him the full-time candy-screen lifestyle he was lobbying for, but we had grace for his upsets and understood our part in the cycle. He needed us to be more nurturing and more consistent with our boundaries so he could understand what the structure and expectations were in a predictable and caring way.

Once we started focusing more on giving my son the compassion and support he needed to regulate in emotional moments, it didn't take long at all for us to turn the ship around. Our chaotic three-kids-during-a-pandemic situation was still there, but our determination to be the calming source of support to our son amid the chaos actually helped us feel calmer too.

After a couple of years of slowly veering off course, when we returned to using playfulness and offering understanding, our little man reset in a huge way. He was still only five years old, and he was still in quarantine without his friends, but the meltdowns and the repairs and the pushback all settled into tolerable levels. Poor kid needed his parents to see his inner world as clearly as they were seeing his response to it.

Scripts: Loving/Supportive/Empathetic Statements when Children are Struggling to Cooperate

"I am so sorry you are hurting, sweet one."

"I can see how sad/angry/scared/confused/upset you are feeling right now."

"You were really hoping for X, and instead, it turned out Y. I see how disappointed you feel."

"I am here, and I won't leave your side until you are feeling better."

"Can I help comfort you as you move through these big feelings?"

"You really wish you didn't have to do this, I can understand that."

"Oh, my love, I am so sorry you are going through this."

"Oh, darling, your body is having a strong pain in response to this news. Is there anything I can do to help you with your feelings?"

Two things happen for our children when we offer them empathy during an upset:

- Their brain calms down because our stance toward them is nonthreatening. So their body stops sending out adrenaline and slowly returns them access to their rational prefrontal cortex.
- They internalize a model of empathy that can be used in other situations with both themselves and toward others.

When our children are struggling to cooperate, it is our job to pause and attune to them. To consider what part our own dysregulation might be playing into that, and then to recognize their emotional and developmental states so we can give them the compassionate connection they need to be able to regroup and move forward.

NERD ALERT: Good Enough Parenting

This is one piece of scientific evidence that I am personally very thankful for. Without the knowledge this research has given me, I could easily spend every day of motherhood fixating on all the ways I have messed up. Instead, I trust in the knowledge that secure parenting does not equal perfect parenting.

Our children do not need us to be robotically regulated and to get it right 100 percent of the time to feel securely attached to us. In the wise words of D. W. Winnicott, our children need us to be "good enough" parents.

According to longitudinal studies by Ed Tronick, parents who are "in sync," or emotionally connected with their children, only 30 percent of the time have a secure attachment pattern. Isn't that such wonderful news!? That 30 percent is an A! Clearly, we are being graded on a curve, but that makes sense in such a complex and important undertaking.

What a relief to hear, right? Secure parents have bad days, off moments, and sometimes lose our patience. But we also come back to connection and repair it when something has ruptured. We screw up, but then we own up, and we listen up until all the hurt and disconnection feels healed up.

This might seem hard to believe because we live in a culture that is obsessed with perfection. With all the images on social media of beautiful people running through wildflower fields with their smiling children in neutral-colored clothing on Instagram, we can get caught up in thinking that perfect parents exist. I promise you, they do not. Getting the equation exactly right is for NASA or neurosurgeons, not for parenting.

THE SECURE LONG GAME

Relating to our children in secure ways is not a short-term magic pill or a trick that will get our children to do what we want all the time. It cannot create impulse control in a two-year-old or mood stability in a teenager. It is a long-game approach that cultivates trust and regulation across stages as our child's brain develops the capacity for greater self-regulation.

If you've spent the last ten years using dominance-based relating or indulgence-based relating, it will take time to shift these patterns into secure ways of relating. Initially, when you start using a connection-focused approach, your children may look at you like you are an alien or ignore you or rage even more than they used to. It does not mean that it *isn't working.* It means they are confused and don't yet trust the changes.

Keep going.

It is all too common for a new therapy client of mine to react with confusion when I offer them empathy when they are upset. They literally don't know what it is or how to feel about it. They often tell me later on in our work that they were convinced that I was pitying them or patronizing them or even mocking them. They have been conditioned to view others' responses to their pain through a power and control matrix. Empathy is uncomfortable to anyone who has experienced very little of it in their close attachment relationships.

A beloved client of mine, Denah, referred to my empathy response as my "squishy face." She would start to tell me a painful story and then sarcastically jab, "Oh, here comes the squishy face." She, like all people, longed for empathy and connection. She wanted to be seen, felt, and connected while she was sharing pain. But it was foreign and even

uncomfortable when I actually offered it. My empathy made her feel exposed and vulnerable, and in her past attachment relationships, that was the equivalent of being under someone else's power grid.

As we spent more time together, she came to trust my empathy and understood that it was genuine care and not a tactic to manipulate her. It eventually became natural and normal for her to connect with me when she was vulnerable, which led her to some incredible changes in the ways she saw herself, her emotions and needs, and the type of relationships she wanted to invest in going forward in her life.

I have also worked with many parents who told me that they found it extremely uncomfortable and awkward to start offering their children empathy. After years of dismissing emotional pain, or trying to fix or solve the underlying drivers of pain, they found it bizarre to try sitting with their child's emotions and offering nurture and support. It felt fake. Or saccharine in some way, like they were putting on an act. It is a strange thing to connect when you've been avoiding or enmeshing for years on end.

My best advice if this is something you feel? Spend some time sharing your past and present pains with someone you know who has a squishy face. Let yourself experience the healing power of empathy and emotional connection. It is far easier to offer it to others when we have first truly experienced it ourselves.

Staying connected to our children is a complex process. So, don't expect it to work as quickly as a power-based approach in terms of behavior. We may not be the pilot of their plane, but we are the aircraft mechanic of their relationship with us and their ideas about their emotions and needs.

When we take care of our own plane and flight patterns, by reflecting on our mentalities, reactions, and past attachment experiences, we can be far more effective mechanics for our children.

THREE

They Can Feel What We Don't Heal

So much of secure attachment comes from our ability to attune to our children and effectively soothe them. Which is why it is so utterly important that we take the time and energy to heal anything in our attachment journey that is still left unprocessed, insecure, or full of trauma.

LIVING WITH GHOSTS

One of my earliest memories as a child is searching for my mother in the basement of our bungalow-style home. I remember the dizzying effect of being scared and needing her and not being able to find her. The memory flashes with empty rooms and open cupboards until, eventually, I heard her crying in a broom closet. I opened the door. There she was, awash in a flood of desperate pain and isolation. I couldn't have been more than three or four at the time of this experience, but I still have a clear image in my head of her body curled up in this dark and dusky hole. My mom, the biggest and most important person in my world, was there, but she was shrunken and spilling over with a volume of suffering I could not understand.

But I could still feel the gravity of it.

My poor mama was plagued with the kind of depression that consumes your whole mind and cripples your ability to see hope or movement forward. She was suicidal and stuck in a home with two small children, a husband with active alcohol addiction, an unresolved trauma history, and a minuscule support system.

She was drowning, and there was no lifeguard on duty.

When I opened the door and she saw my little face and little body, she did her best to hide her despair and peel herself off the floor. She didn't want me to feel her burdens, but at that point in her journey, there was no way for me not to.

Because she was living with ghosts.

The ghosts were from her unresolved childhood trauma.

These ghosts affected her tremendously because they lived inside of her. They were voices of the past screaming terrible things about her worth, her safety, and her ability to cope. The ghosts haunted her day in and day out and told her a story about herself and her life that kept her hopes low and her self-image even lower.

When I was small, I didn't know where the ghosts came from, but I could feel them—hell, I could see them on her face and in her stunted gait and in the way that she tried to hide from them under the covers in her bed on the bad days.

Naturally, I spent years trying to exorcise my mom of those ghosts. I tried every spell a kid could come up with. I was compliant. I was silly. I was compassionate. I was firm and took charge. I worked my tail off. I prayed for her. I pleaded with her. I kept watch of her moods day and night and tried to morph into whatever it was I thought would make her feel better.

And in this way, her ghosts became my ghosts too.

They cultivated my insecure-resistant attachment pattern.

The thing about haunted houses is that everyone in the house has to contend with the haunting. The ghosts entered the house through my mom's past, but they became a part of my present too. They were directly in the path between me and the kind of security and connection I needed from my mom.

The apparitions morphed inside of me, and delivered different messages to me than they did to my mom. In my head, they whispered things like: “You better be extra good and happy, or else something bad is going to happen.” Unlike the feelings of worthlessness they passed on to my mother, these ghosts endowed me with anxious hyper-responsibility.

She inherited these ghosts from her father and her mother, and they from theirs, and on and on who knows how far back before then.

Generational ghosts live in our DNA through a process called “epigenetics,” and they also live in the ways we act and speak and think, and definitely in the ways that we relate to our children and spouses and closest friends.

These ghosts are the reason that most of us need therapists. We need places to identify and understand our ghosts so that we can release them into the past instead of continuing to let them haunt our present and our children’s present and future.

Which is why working on ourselves is one of the most important things we do to support our children. Many people believe that if you leave a haunted house, the ghosts will stay there, that ghosts are tied to places or times. And maybe that is true with other forms of ghosts (not my specialty), but attachment ghosts stay with us even when we leave a place of trauma; they take residence inside our nervous systems and follow us wherever we go.

Until we face them.

Generational trauma passes down from parent to child for as many generations as it takes for someone to finally be ready to face the insecure feelings and patterns the trauma created.

And, one day, when I was nine years old, my mother was ready to do just that.

She decided to figure out how to release her ghosts.

She will tell you that she felt like she had no other choice. With nearly two decades as a therapist watching people in these critical moments, I will tell you that she absolutely made a choice. She chose hope at a time when it felt almost impossible to believe things could get better.

She checked herself into a psychiatric hospital to get help. Her depression had reached an untenable state, and she was on the brink of ending her life. Instead, she asked for help.

After she was stabilized at the hospital, she came home determined to continue on a healing path. She went to therapy for a long time. And one by one, she tackled those ghosts. Each ghost was telling her something about what had happened to her and how it had impacted her. And slowly but surely, she found her own voice and healed her heart.

Not to say that the ghosts don't show up every now and then; they do. But they aren't as loud and they don't stay as long, and they rarely lead her to the edge of the cliff like they used to.

And in this heroic act of taking care of herself, my mom started something new in our family. A path toward wholeness and connectedness. And as a result, my path as a parent has involved far less ghost hunting than my mother's path.

When we take the time to do our own healing work, to process and face the stories in our lives that are riddled with disturbance and pain, we are doing two very important things to increase security in our children's lives:

We are getting our bodies more settled and present. Just because we are not talking about or thinking about our pasts doesn't mean that our children aren't contending with their impact on our ability to be connected and calm. When we heal ourselves, we make it far easier for our children to find comfort in being close to us.

We are off-loading generational trauma in our lifetime instead of sending it onward for them to sort out. When we bravely face the pain of our past and the insecurity in our inherited attachment patterns, we can relate better to our children, which means less therapy for them!

Because my mom made that healing U-turn when I was nine, I was able to off-load whatever inherited trauma I had from my childhood before I even had my children. I am, by no means, a perfect parent, and I occasionally feel the pull of some of those ghostly haunts from my early years, but I am able to recognize when the ghosts get in the way and quickly apologize to my children and return to giving them a steady and caring presence.

My mom's choice to take care of herself helped me learn the importance of healing myself. Which has given me the privilege of raising my children with more secure patterns.

All parents deserve healing, and all children deserve parents who feel healed.

HEALING WHILE DEALING

Yes, our children are the most beautiful gift that life gives to us, *and* they are also heat-seeking hovercrafts for wherever we are wounded, insecure, or clueless. Our wounds from the past get activated in our nervous system when we are in the throes of the highly emotional world of parenting.

Instead of resenting our children for hitting on these sore spots, we can look at it as a gift that they are helping us uncover what is unresolved or still tender from our past.

Old relational wounds get exposed in present relational settings. It's why we can sometimes hear harsh words, tones, or messages that were directed at us during our childhoods coming out of our own mouths toward our children in tense

moments. It can feel eerie and spooky. And it is, because it's those sneaky ghosts seeping out from inside of us.

When these ghosts pop out of us toward our children, it doesn't mean we have failed our children. It means we have some healing to do. That we need to recognize the unresolved trauma within the haunting and get to work releasing the ghosts so that our children don't have to deal with them. That's some beautiful generational healing.

I like to remind healing parents that trauma patterns usually develop in a family over multiple generations, and so it makes sense that it will also take multiple generations to fully heal those patterns. I sure hope my children have the opportunity to heal and grow beyond what I have been able to do.

Repeat after me: *By taking the time to heal my childhood ghosts, I am unloading my children from the burden of carrying them onward.*

It's one thing to say this out loud, and another thing altogether to do it. Following are some suggestions for how you can go about this work.

REFLECTION IS DIRECTION

About a hundred years ago (give or take), I was a backpacking guide in the San Juan Mountains of southern Colorado. It was my job to take a group of people on weeklong trips through the backcountry with only the things we could carry on our person. I had many duties on these trips, things like cooking, facilitating conversations, and administering medical care for any injuries that could be handled in the woods. While all of those things were important to the trip going well, the most crucial part of my job was navigation.

If we didn't know where we were on the map, or where we were headed, our fun, outdoorsy adventure could turn into a

backcountry disaster real quick like.

If you haven't been in the backcountry before, I want you to know that feeling a little bit lost is par for the course. The trails sometimes become unclear, as there is not enough foot traffic to keep them ingrained. Not to mention the ways that weather can interfere. A cloud cover can obscure an important peak, or a lightning storm can redirect you from an exposed area to a different route for safety purposes.

When that happens, when the trail starts fading or the clouds start looming, the surest way to know how to go forward is to reflect on how you got there. By paying close attention to the things you have passed, you can piece together where you have already been on the map and what that means about where you are now and where you want to go from there.

When my mother decided to heal, she had to take a long, hard look at the map to identify where she had been, where her parents had been, and how she had gotten so lost in the woods as a result. From there, she began to identify other landmarks around her in order to find ways back to the trails that would enable all of us to head in the right direction.

Had she never done that, I would have had to do much more work than I did. I still had to do some healing work, but she had really helped us all know where we were on the map.

My story is proof that parents can make U-turns and that those U-turns don't just turn *their* life around, they change the trajectory of their children's lives.

It is not selfish to get help or to work on taking better care of yourself during parenthood.

As my mom processed her past, she cleared away a ton of the emotional minefield in her body so that we didn't have to tread as lightly around her. There were fewer possible ways to detonate her self-hatred or despondency, which meant there

was more room for us to take up space with our own big feelings.

It took me many years to truly establish a secure style of relating, but the seeds were first planted when my mom took the time to learn about her past and understand herself as a result. She was never able to fully rely on either of her parents for emotional support, but by understanding that and grieving that, she created a home where it was safe for us to all learn together.

WHEN OUR CHILDREN TRIGGER OUR GHOSTS

Whatever past experiences we avoid healing stay active inside of us and become easily triggered in seemingly unrelated moments.

I had a dear client Alison, who came to me for help with her daughter years ago. Her daughter was four years old at the time and had a strong personality that my client was struggling to manage. Alison knew all the things she should be doing and saying in response to her daughter's tantrums and power battles, but she found it incredibly hard to do them in the moment. Instead of responding with empathy and working to connect, her body would constrict and her words would come out terse or not at all.

> **PARENTING PERSPECTIVE**
>
> **Cultivating a Secure Attachment with Our Kids Means We Have to Cultivate One with Ourselves**
>
> As a Korean adoptee I have had to unpack and heal from big-T and little-t traumas while simultaneously working to raise my little ones in a conscious and respectful way. In the beginning of my parenting

> journey I desperately clung to the how-tos, tips, and strategies. But I found myself burned out and repeating the same self-abandonment pattern I had been in throughout my entire life. I was trying to get everything "right" with my kids, give them everything I thought they needed without giving myself those same things.
>
> Once I acknowledged this, I began to learn how to validate and feel my own emotions, honor my needs, and love the parts of me I saw as unlovable for so long. This is when everything with my kids finally fell into place.
>
> —MAGGIE VIERS, occupational therapist, coach, mother of four

My client grew up with a father who was consistently angry. He was grouchy and punitive when things didn't go the way he wanted them to, and my client had learned to cope with this childhood attachment reality by making herself small and compliant and disappearing into her books whenever she could. She developed an avoidant attachment with her father.

Her primary coping pattern was *avoid and distract.* Alison was introverted by nature and had a genteel personality. In contrast, Alison's sister, Tamara, was a fiery personality, and had an entirely different dynamic with their dad. Tamara would argue back and slam her door, and the battles would escalate into sometimes truly frightening levels.

Alison got out of her home as soon as she could at eighteen and kept her family contact to a minimum after that. Living in the angry tension of her home had been truly traumatizing for her. She intentionally married a very mild-tempered partner and planned on raising a family with as little drama and anger as possible.

She wanted to break the cycle.

Then Gina was born. That child flew out of the womb ready to take on the world. She was far more Tamara than she was Alison in her temperament. It was her biological wiring to be strong-willed, sensory seeking, and highly opinionated. As an infant, Alison found Gina's personality sometimes tiring but still endearing. But as Gina hit toddlerhood, Alison was visited by her family ghosts. When Gina tantrumed, Alison experienced acute emotional paralysis and terror rise up in her body.

It was clear at the onset of our work that, despite being at least four times as large as her child, during emotionally intense moments, Alison entered a childlike state and lost her ability to offer Gina a secure parenting response.

The experience of someone, albeit a preschooler, expressing anger freely sent Alison into a body state where she no longer felt like a grown-up parent but a powerless child. This would lead her to either going into flight mode and letting Gina push through boundaries to keep the peace, or in the moments where she tried to hold a boundary, she would end up resorting to the kind of power and control parenting that she had vowed never to use with her children, making threats, yelling, and using punishment of any sort available.

Alison felt awful about the way she was responding to Gina, but no matter how many tricks and tips she tried, she always ended up reactive and regretful. As soon as she saw the scared and hurt look on her daughter's face in response to her behavior, she would crumble in shame and feel not only powerless over Gina but powerless over herself.

The problem wasn't that Alison didn't *know what to do.* Or that Gina was a bad kid. The problem was that every time Gina had a developmentally typical meltdown, Alison's trauma joined the room, and she was no longer interacting with just Gina but also battling her father and sister.

In order to give Gina a calm and confident and compassionate attachment experience, Alison had to go ghost hunting.

In the end, Alison was able to reflect more on her trauma responses to her daughter, and to recognize how dysregulating it had been for Gina when she had responded to her toddler's meltdowns with terror. "That would make me mad, too, if someone responded to my pain or upset by treating me like a perpetrator."

Alison worked to separate her early traumas from her present position as the parent, and instead of shutting down or clamping down on Gina, she was able to contain her with empathy, understanding, and confidence in the boundaries she was setting.

Gina still had meltdowns, but instead of turning into a nuclear disaster, they transformed into opportunities for Alison to soothe and support Gina. Alison no longer felt afraid of Gina's anger and could be receptive to it, which had a de-escalating effect. Gina knew she would be understood and contained with love in a moment when she was flooded with upset.

NERD ALERT: Store-ies

How our memories from childhood are stored in our minds and bodies, and how we tell stories about our childhood relationships, is linked to our current attachment patterns.

The Adult Attachment Interview research spearheaded by Mary Main at the University of California, Berkeley, has uncovered that the way a person remembers attachment experiences and then how they narrate those memories can be

linked to the attachment patterns they will then develop with their children.

SECURE MEMORIES AND STORYTELLING: Folks with secure attachment histories are able to recall more stories with more coherent details than any of the insecure categories. This is true for both positive and negative experiences. Why? Because, in a secure household, there was permission to feel and to express. Painful experiences were felt, discussed, and processed as a group, giving them more memorability. This makes it easier to remember things in more detail later on because memories are less triggering when they have been processed in the care of others.

AVOIDANT/DISMISSIVE MEMORIES AND STORYTELLING: Folks with this primary attachment pattern struggle to remember relational stories, both positive and negative. This is because their primary coping skill was to distract themselves from emotions both in others and in themself. This leads to less attention and presence in those moments, which decreases how ingrained the memory becomes. Not remembering is the coping skill, so it makes it hard to process what exactly happened.

RESISTANT/PREOCCUPIED MEMORIES AND STORYTELLING: Folks with this primary pattern have lots of vivid emotional memories. They can explain in detail about the hard things they experienced, in particular, but whereas the secure folks can remember and feel calm, this group of people (it was me before I healed!) struggles to feel resolved about the memories. Interestingly, when given the Adult Attachment Interview, preoccupied folks tend

to get their tenses mixed up and answer questions about the past with stories from the present.

DISORGANIZED/UNRESOLVED MEMORIES AND STORYTELLING: Folks with this primary attachment pattern struggle to share their experiences without shutting down (dissociating or separating their feelings from their story) or, alternatively, amping up (getting defensive, panicky, etc.).

So, if you can't remember your stories or have a hard time recalling what happened to you, it is likely because there was either too much emotion (i.e., in the case of a dissociative response to unstable and abusive caregivers) or unpredictable emotion (i.e., in the case of enmeshed caregivers) or not enough emotion expressed (i.e., in an avoidant response in the case of emotionally dismissive caregivers).

Insecure homes lack a place for coherent and connected storytelling. If you grew up in a home where the base was insecure, your process of finding and editing your stories is going to take more grit and intention, but I promise it is possible.

Secure childhoods are not childhoods without pain. They are childhoods where pain did not have to be experienced in isolation. Everyone has pain and suffering in their lives! Secure experiences are ones where there is a place to be heard and validated about one's particular pains and agonies. When times are hard, securely attached children are able to process the pain with their caregivers as those feelings occur. This means that there isn't a long backlog of pain or a blurriness about themes. Secure folks know a lot about their inner

> emotional landscape and the emotional culture they inherited from their caregivers. Warts and all.

TELLING WHILE FEELING

While there are many different paths toward healing our attachment traumas and pains, the most effective path is *in the presence of caring relationships.* These caring relationships can be with therapists, sweethearts, dear friends, or a group in your community.

My healing journey took all of those categories.

Trauma wounds are *relational*, so when we are able to process them with people who are able to be emotionally present, empathetic, and understanding, it gives us some of the relational responses we needed in the past but were not able to get.

My healing experiences were first with groups of friends in college, then with a therapist, with an incredibly supportive graduate school community, and then with my sweetheart and now spouse. Those healing experiences helped me learn how to receive care. As someone with a resistant pattern from childhood, I knew how to seek out connection and care, but I struggled to ever feel soothed by it.

Over time, the predictable and repetitive care that I received helped me to feel safe and secure and shifted the anxiety in my nervous system. My sense of self-worth and confidence grew immensely. I was able to learn a secure attachment pattern, and feel *so* much more physically regulated as a result.

As human beings, we are wired to tell stories not only for social entertainment purposes but also as a way to help us process and integrate our painful experiences.

How do we tell our painful stories to others in a way that has a therapeutic effect on us?

Share the story while *feeling the feels* inherent to it. Yup. We've gotta cry some to get the hurt out. I think of tears as the way that pain exits our bodies. Sometimes our pain comes out in voluminous swaths of tears, and sometimes it's just a little watery in our eye sockets. Writer Brené Brown refers to this as "telling the story of who you are with your whole heart."

The pain we share needs to be felt by the people we are sharing it with. This is the process of co-regulation. (It's also good practice for learning what our children need from us.) If we share our painful stories with people who are shut down about their own pain, it won't likely lead us to feeling seen. We need people who are open to receiving our tender emotions while staying calm enough for us to feel secure with them.

We have to steer clear of despair. Processing our pain and letting it out is different than getting stuck in it. Despair is what happens when we let our past pain define us and we wade in it instead of moving through it. Healing grief is what happens when we allow ourselves to honestly face the pain of the past so that it can stop taking up space in the present.

In one of my favorite therapy documentaries, *The Color of Fear,* a group of men explore their pain and emotions around race dynamics in America. In a pivotal moment in the process, a Latino American (brown) man is urging a European American (white) man to stop rationalizing and avoiding the pain of the conversation, and says to him, "The cure for the pain *is* the pain."

The time we spend releasing the emotions we feel about past hurts and moving through them is time spent healing. It moves us forward out of the pain and into rest and resolution.

I realize that many of you do not have the type of people in your world yet who can offer you a space to feel and heal, or

the financial resources to pay for a therapist. It may not be an easy task, but I hope you won't stop searching. Keep looking for the tenderhearted people in your communities, or a therapist who works on a sliding scale and who feels warm and understanding.

Healing by sharing and feeling might feel like torture to anyone who has gotten through life by avoiding their childhood stuff. The *fear of the pain* can be immense. And coupled with that is the fear of being selfish and accused of navel-gazing. As caregivers, we try so hard to meet others' needs taking the time to heal our own wounds can seem like indulgence at best and foolishness at worst.

The number-one reason I see my clients struggling to manage pain or get support is unresolved trauma and relational pain. If we don't deal with our past, then our children will inherit that burden, and it will be much harder for them to process it since they feel the trauma of it but won't actually know the details of why they are feeling it.

You know what's amazing? By doing our own work, our children can experience permission to process their pain *as they go.* Meaning they won't have a ton of unprocessed baggage as adults. When we acknowledge and heal pain from the past, we are doing the most central action necessary to earn a secure attachment style.

FLYING OUR OWN PLANES

While our children need us to take on the role of aircraft mechanic in their lives, they also need us to be sure to service *our own plane* and fly it as calmly and safely as we can. If we are not safe for flight, it becomes impossible to give our children what they need.

Sometimes life circumstances and stress take us into a downward spiral. While we can't always control the incoming

stressors in our lives, we can commit to regularly checking our own safety panels and fuel levels.

Remember my story about our infertility and loss that led to twin babies during a pandemic? My check engine light was definitely going off. Even after I realized I had gotten stuck in a control-focused mindset with my son, I struggled to feel calm and regulated.

NERD ALERT: The Nuts and Bolts of Healing

When we have any form of unhealed trauma, it lives inside us in several places. All of these places need our care and attention to return our body to a state of feeling safe and secure.

Our nervous system (the emotional disturbance from the trauma hangs here). Things like startle responses, trouble calming our anxiety enough to fall asleep, feeling fatigued from adrenal burnout, etc.

Our thoughts (the story we told ourselves or the story that other people told us about the trauma and its meaning hangs here). Negative beliefs about ourselves or our future, such as “I am not worthy of love” or “I don’t deserve to be happy.” As well as large, sweeping negative beliefs about others, like, “No one really cares about me, they just want to use me.”

Our coping patterns (the things we do when we feel triggered and dysregulated). Drinking our dysregulation away. Ignoring our feelings and trying to please others as a survival tool. Ignoring our needs and neglecting self-care and instead

> numbing and checking out for hours on the internet or with other tools of distraction.
>
> If you are healing past attachment traumas, remember to offer care to your body, your ways of thinking about yourself and others, and your rhythms of coping with pain.

A few months after making intentional changes to how I was responding to my son, I recognized that my patience was still not back to levels that felt good to me. Even though I was doing a better job of how I was acting on the outside, I was feeling pretty consistently agitated overall on the inside. My bandwidth was low. Why? Because I was spending all of my time meeting everyone else's needs and very little time fueling and servicing my own plane.

The first thing I did to start taking care of myself was to schedule time to get some regular exercise three days a week. Running helps me feel better physically, and also gives me time alone to think and reflect, which I craved as a mom of three in particular.

Next, I reconnected with a therapist to help me figure out what was driving my short-temperedness.

Unfortunately, even after getting those things in order (which I recognize is not a privilege that everyone can experience due to lack of support or time), I continued to struggle with high levels of agitation and, despite my best efforts, could feel it seeping through to my relationships with my son and my husband.

So, I talked with my obstetrician and made the decision to try using an antidepressant.

For me, the medication was incredibly helpful. I felt like myself again, and spilled milk felt like spilled milk and not a nuclear disaster in my nervous system. I was so thankful that I

had been able to recognize that my dysregulation was causing tension between me and my son.

I'm not saying that we should all go get a prescription every time we are struggling with our children (medication is not right for everyone!) but rather that when we are struggling to be regulated in response to our children, it is our responsibility to identify what we can do to fly or fuel our plane differently.

The fastest way to change a relationship dynamic is to take better care of ourselves. This is true across all relationships, but most profoundly true in the dynamic between parent and child. If we are struggling with our children, there is always something we can do to make sure *our plane* is in optimal condition so that we can properly help them take care of theirs.

FOUR

Feelings Are for Feeling

One of the most powerful gifts we can offer to our children is a healthy relationship with their emotions. Emotional intelligence is a massive advantage to our children's lifelong resilience. Children who have positive ideas about their feeling states and who are able to articulate them and share them with others are far healthier in their coping patterns and relationships.

Unfortunately, many of us did not learn about our emotions in healthy ways growing up, so we carry some confusion about what healthy emotional processing and wellness actually look like.

I am going to go *MythBusters* throughout this chapter so that we can all be clear and confident in the wisdom that feelings are, in fact, for feeling.

MYTH ONE: JOHN WAYNE AND THE TOUGHNESS FOLKLORE

Have you seen a John Wayne movie recently? No? Me neither. Why? *Because it is outdated!* So is the correlating emotional approach. John Wayne was an actor who starred in the old Westerns of Hollywood between 1926 and 1976. He embodied the "lone cowboy" and the myth of "rugged individualism." He never showed fear. He never cried tears. He never felt remorse for the manifest destiny he was using to ruin the lives of the Native American people that came between him and his desire to dominate the Wild West.

NERD ALERT: A Word on Memory

One of the most common questions I get from parents is: “How can I heal from my past if I don’t remember my childhood?”

To answer this question I want to start by explaining how memories are stored in our brains and bodies in two very different ways.

The first is what we call “explicit” memory, which is the type of memory most of us think of when we use the word memory. Explicit memory is made up of the conscious visual, physical, and cognitive aspects of an experience that help us to tell a story about it.

The second type is “implicit” memory, and it is made up of the body sensations that activate during an experience where we are not fully conscious (a.k.a. in a reactive or subdued state). It’s also referred to as a “body” memory since it is expressed in physical sensations such as a fast heartbeat, nausea, or a tight chest.

If you cannot remember your childhood, it is likely because you lived in a body state that prevented you from feeling safe and connected enough to process your experiences. It may be that you had disorganized attachment figures who were abusive or neglectful. These experiences are too complex to understand as a child, so instead of having explicit memories, you likely have loads of feelings about your younger self (usually negative), or emotional responses in your body when you encounter these people or locations in your present life.

This can also be true if you were in a “safe” environment, but one that was woefully emotionally

barren. A lack of connection is scary and confusing for a child and leads to a shutdown of awareness.

If you do not have explicit memories of childhood, we know that there was not a sufficient amount of safety and support for you to process those experiences in the past. So processing them in the present is about learning how to feel your feelings, honor what you do know about your past, and work to be kind and accepting toward yourself and your emotional needs in the present.

The John Wayne Myth Goes Like This

Pain/feelings = weakness

Numbness = strength

Strength = showing no emotion, never needing help, and always being on top

These three core beliefs don't lead people into resilience and fulfilling lives; they lead people into the traps of isolation. Let there be no mistake, no one who handles all their feelings in isolation feels confident and grounded. They feel awkward and anxious and depressed and lonely until they find a way to *numb* themselves, and then they feel *nothing,* which isn't the same as feeling strong and resilient.

After years in the John Wayne emotional belief system, people can convince themselves that they are fine, but when we take a look at their relationships and their coping patterns, we don't see resilience, we see numbness and lack of close authentic connection.

This belief system *feels* like protection when there is no other option for resilience. The John Wayne myth of emotions is handed down from caregivers who do not know how to feel or process their feelings. If there are no emotionally supportive

caregivers or partners or friends to rely on, toughness does become necessary. But when we confuse numbness for resilience, we actually put ourselves and our children at risk. If we can't feel the pain of a wound, we are far less likely to get the treatment we need to heal it.

NERD ALERT: Preparing Our Children for the "Real World"

Parents are often nervous to be compassionate and tender with their children in the fear that it will make them too soft for the real world. That they won't have the necessary "training" to endure the hard things they will face from others outside of their home.

The opposite, however, is true. The more love and belonging and care a child receives at home, the more it operates like a good down jacket surrounding our children as they face the blustery winds of other people's coldness or cruelty outside of our homes.

TOUGHNESS FACT

Pain/feelings = opportunities to co-regulate together Connection = strength

Strength = listening to our bodies, sharing our pain with others, experiencing connection in vulnerability

Significant studies on American veterans' postwar experiences have found that soldiers with unresolved childhood trauma are more likely to develop PTSD after a war event. The fact that they were exposed to harshness from parents in their childhood did not better prepare them for the

adversity of war; it made it more likely that they would blame themselves for things outside of their control and use avoidance as their primary coping response. A person's avoidance of their traumatic experiences actually increases the severity of their PTSD. The more we avoid our feelings, the more trapped those feelings become in our bodies and minds.

The soldiers who had more secure early attachment experiences were primed to talk about their pain, reach for support when they were struggling, and recognize that they were not in control during moments of terror and loss.

Nurturing our children doesn't leave them too soft; it gives them skills for resilience.

Tough Feet

I have some hard-core calloused feet. Mostly because I love to run and I don't have a budget for pedicures. For many years, I thought that a callus protected a body part from injury. I saw my callouses as a sign of toughness and took great pride in them. "Look how tough my nasty feet are," I told myself. "That's some good foot protection and a sign of how tough I am."

Even though my feet were tough, it turns out they were not protected. One of my sisters works in a hospital and says that the worst uncontrolled infections she has seen in the ER have come from the cracks in calloused feet. Why? Because no doctor in the world can reconnect dead tissue. It's dead. The open wounds that result from the cracking of a foot callus leave the foot exposed to harmful bacteria that sneak right on up into the bloodstream. The only way to help that wound close? Remove the calluses. De-toughen the footsie.

Fact: Connected living tissues with sensations help us stay healthy and heal faster.

Feet without calluses have more sensation. They feel more pain when injured, *but* by being soft and tender and having connected alive tissue, they have enough blood flow to allow for healing. A cut in a soft heel can heal. A cut in a calloused heel is stuck open until the dead skin is removed and the soft tissue can reconnect.

Just like our feet, when *we* are emotionally calloused, we are more likely to crack, and when we crack, the healing process is more complicated and takes far longer. Emotional resiliency lies in our ability to notice, feel, and heal our pain.

FACT: EMOTIONAL AWARENESS IS NECESSARY FOR RESILIENCE

Feelings become problematic when we don't know how to process them effectively, so we resort to shutting them down (numbing) or drowning in them (obsessing). To help our children effectively navigate their emotional states in a way that leads to resilience, we need to first understand this:

Feelings are for feeling.

Notice that I didn't say feelings are for wallowing in.

Nor did I say feelings are for justifying hurt toward others.

I said they are for feeling, which means exactly what I am saying. When we are able to tolerate our feelings, to physically release them, name them, and share them with others, we are able to move on from whatever pain triggered those feelings.

For many of us, this message flies in opposition to the way we were taught to cope with our pain: we were taught to *avoid* and *fear* feelings. To see them as weak or dangerous or indulgent. Our caregivers likely believed they were helping us become more resilient by guiding us to ignore or shut down our emotional states. This is the folklore of toughness. The idea that if you feel your feelings *less,* you are stronger and more stable. Toughness says: "I am better off numb than in pain." "It is weak to cry or complain." "I should 'handle' my pain without drawing any attention to myself."

Remember, as we guide our children in developing resilience, the goal is not to be tough and numb; it's to be strong and connected.

PARENTING PERSPECTIVE

The Courage to Feel

As a man in society, one of the things I'm constantly struck by is the pervasiveness of the myth that men who express emotions (other than rage) are weak. In my own journey as a man, nothing could be further from the truth. Learning to acknowledge, face, and express emotions in productive ways without losing control is a testament to one's deep strength and resilience. If there is one radically countercultural thing I'm trying to instill in my own three boys through my parenting, it's the reality that it takes profound courage and strength to allow yourself to truly feel; and if you fail to do so, your experience of life will always just be lukewarm.

—JON FOGEL, author, parenting educator, father of three

MYTH: MATURITY MEANS HANDLING OUR FEELINGS ALONE

I love many forms of independence in my children. I love when my children learn to use utensils when they eat or blow their nose when they are snotty. I love when they learn to ride their bikes or put away their dishes or solve a tricky math problem without help (hallelujah)! In so many realms of child development, independence is the healthy and ideal outcome of maturity. When our children can complete practical tasks on their own, it is good stuff!

But not for emotional surges. Healthy, secure adults do not isolate when they are feeling sad or scared or ashamed or even when they are experiencing deep joy. Even in adulthood:

Feelings are for sharing.

One of my closest friends recently had to say goodbye to her beloved dog Chance. When she knew that it was time to put him down, she reached out to us all and cried with us about how sad she was feeling about saying goodbye to him. "He was truly one of my most secure attachment figures," she shared with us in our group video chat. She also processed the strange guilt that comes with being a pet owner and making the call to the vet.

We all responded with empathy and care and reminisced with her about memories of Chance that we would always hold dear.

Wouldn't it be weird if she had told no one and "handled it independently"?

The sharing of our vulnerable emotional states is how we birth resilience. My friend's instinct to call us and let us in on her pain was a secure reach. She made a bid for our support that ultimately helped her to process and regulate. Emotional needs should not evolve into independence but rather into

healthy and secure interdependence. When I am struggling, I reach out to my friends to get support as well.

This is what we want our children to develop. An instinct to reach for others and to express and share their pain so that they can regulate and return to a state of calm when life situations are throwing them curveballs.

When children are given safe and warm relationships to help them co-regulate in emotional states, they develop a higher capacity for processing emotions. This means that they are able to feel their feelings and let them out. Letting out our feelings is cathartic and helps our brain to integrate information adaptively.

The goal of healthy emotional development is to learn *interdependence.* Not to become dependent, or to isolate, but to learn how to give and receive care and co-regulation effectively and at appropriate times.

NERD ALERT: Alexithymia

"Alexithymia" is a fancy schmancy word to describe a condition where a person has an inability to either recognize or describe their emotions.

Why does this fancy word matter? Because our ability to notice what we feel and label it with words is directly correlated to our ability to effectively regulate our emotions.

While the toughness myth might seem like a path to being a regulated adult, it actually results in an adult with very little knowledge of their feelings or capacity to label them, understand them, or regulate them.

People with alexithymia are not only less emotionally healthy in their relationships, but they are also at increased risk for chemical dependencies, self-harm, and depression.

Validating and naming our children's emotional states does not make them more emotionally distressed; it gives them the knowledge and insights necessary to become more emotionally intelligent, which, in the long run, gives them the foundational tools they need to cope effectively with what they feel.

The *independently handling feelings* myth wants us to believe that emotional resilience lies in someone's ability to avoid pain or numb feelings, but the attachment research has shown us that security and resilience emanate from *emotionally attuned* early caregiver relationships. Because those experiences for our children help them learn a pattern of *reaching* and *receiving* that they can take onward in their lives.

Plus, when other people respond calmly and compassionately to our feelings, we become more comfortable with feelings. The more opportunities we are given to *receive emotional support from our attachment figures,* to *understand what we feel,* and then to *be effectively soothed* in our feeling states, the less out of control our responses are to those feelings when they arise.

Basically, if other people (a.k.a. our parents) don't freak the flip out when we are emotional as children, we are far less likely to have extreme reactions to our emotional states as we grow and mature. Instead of panicking or shutting down, we learn how to *tolerate our emotional states* and use them to guide us toward care for self and others.

Mind-blowing right?

The more we embrace what we are feeling, the less we negatively react to it, and the more healthy control we develop over our emotional reactions in response.

Repeat after me: *Toughness is not resilience. Toughness is what we develop when there is no one capable of teaching us how to feel and share our emotions. Tough = numb isolation.*

Resilience is what we develop when we have loved ones who are capable of helping us process our emotions and experience the regulated state that comes from empathetic care. Resilient = regulated connection.

MYTH: IT'S OUR JOB TO STOP OUR CHILDREN'S PAINFUL EMOTIONS

It is *so* important to respond with care when our children are in pain, but it is also so important that we do not try to *rescue them from their pain.* There is a big difference between being emotionally supportive when our child is emotional and taking on a rescuing stance where we try to stand between our children and the big emotional surges inside of them.

Our children need to feel their feelings. They need to know how to recognize and process their feelings for long enough to learn about them and what needs they direct them toward.

Emotions are like waves. They come up. They go down. Then they do it all over again. Sometimes they roll and sometimes they crash. Sometimes there is low tide and sometimes there is high tide, but there is always the tide.

We live in a culture that has many, many negative messages about emotions. We should hide them, temper them, or even ignore them. These ideas, unfortunately, just lead to more wipeouts. You can't temper a wave, and if you ignore it? It will knock you over. You must ride it and go with its flow so that you can get safely to shore without being pummeled in the sand or lost at sea.

So, when our children are in the throes of a big wave, instead of trying to stop the wave of feelings, we want to teach them how to surf the emotional waters they are in.

How do we safely surf our child's emotional waves?

Well, we need a surfboard.

Something we can stand on while the wave does its thing.

The surfboard in this metaphor is *empathy.*

It is the best way to keep our kid's head and our own head above water.

Empathy may seem complex if you haven't been given a ton of it in your life, but, in reality, it is quite simple. We allow ourselves to "catch" a bit of the feeling(s) that our child is experiencing. Not so much that we start to drown under it, but enough of a sip to help us identify it and relate to it.

If we can keep ourselves on the surfboard, a.k.a. in a state of empathy and understanding for what our child is feeling, we will get safely to shore. Our child's nervous system will calm, and we will both be able to melt together and process what just happened.

If strong feelings are met with strong support from others, the next time they arise, they don't feel as overwhelming to everyone involved, leading to smaller waves in the future.

THE FUSS ON THE BUS

My son is a social butterfly. He has been since the day he was born. When he was an infant, he would fuss at home until I took him out to the grocery store, where he could smile at new faces. Then he would be all giggles and goo.

In kindergarten, he wanted to ride the bus on *the very first day* because he was so excited to make new friends and he didn't want to wait another forty minutes to get started. The

night before, he'd asked me how he was going to set up playdates with his new friends. So I made him "friendship cards" to hand out to any new friends he made so that their parents could get in touch with me to set up playdates.

I made him five cards, and by the end of his first day of kinder, they were all gone.

He was one happy camper. He even gave a card to a fifth-grade girl on the bus named Ava. I tried to loosen his expectations on that one, reminding him that the average fifth-grade girl probably isn't interested in playdates with kindergarten boys, but he just looked at me and said, "You never know, Mom, you never know." His enthusiasm for riding the bus and making new friends continued at this adorable level for quite some time.

Then, fairly suddenly, a couple of months into the school year, something shifted. He came home one day and asked me if I could pick him up from school so he didn't have to ride the bus. I asked him what was wrong, and he said that Bill (in his class) hadn't been on the bus for a week, and that the other two boys he liked, Cole and Tyler, had been sitting together and talking about things he didn't understand. (They were both in older grades.)

I leaned over and said, "Does that make you feel lonely or sad?"

A wave of sorrow that had been cooped up inside his body instantly spilled out.

He looked up at me and made an audible wailing yeeeeeeaaaahhhhsss while he slumped over and wrapped his arms around my neck. I carried his weeping little body from the bus stop to our front lawn, where we sat down and he cried into my shoulder for a good ten minutes. It was a long cry.

He was *so* sad. He was a lonely extrovert unsure of where to belong on those afternoons when his buddy wasn't there.

I rocked him and simply said, “I’m here, buddy, I got you. I am so sorry you are feeling lonely and lost on the bus.”

Internally, I was panicking. Was he being socially rejected? Were these kids terrible judges of character? Or worse, was he doing things that warranted this isolation? Had he been bugging the other kids with his tendency to dominate a conversation? I wanted to start asking him a million questions.

But I’d been a therapist long enough to know better.

If we try to problem solve and rationalize while our children are in the midst of an emotional wave, everyone will just get a mouthful of salty water.

So I stayed grounded and reminded myself that all waves come down.

And it did.

He hit the shore and made that shuddery breath that we all make once an emotional wave has subsided.

When he came up for air after it passed, he looked me straight in the eye and said, “Mom, I’m okay now.”

We had surfed the wave together and made it safely to shore.

After we had effectively co-regulated, we could talk a little more about what had been going on. It isn’t until our children are out of the noise of a crashing wave that they can even think or hear us and process what happened and what they can do about it.

Waiting for the waves to pass is incredibly hard for caring parents. We want so badly to use words and wisdom to help our child calm down faster. But it rarely works. They can’t even truly hear us. That’s why the best choice is to wait until after they are connected and regulated.

How do we know that it is time to use words? Our children will feel calm. They will be able to look us in the eye again. They will easily use their words again.

After my son got over the wave that day, we talked about how he could self-advocate with his friends and ask to be included in future conversations. We also talked about the lonely feelings he felt and how to continue to notice them and share about them if they came up again. He told me he wasn't lonely in his classroom or any other time at school, only on the bus rides home.

The next day on the bus, he learned about a playdate that Cole and Tyler were having together. (Like most five-year-olds, his eavesdropping skills were excellent.) He came home and asked me if I could help get him invited. So I did. They said yes, and he had a blast.

As a third grader, he is now incredibly adept at asking other kids over for playdates or asking to join in on a game or conversation he is interested in.

I don't take this mature approach 100 percent of the time, but when I do, we are all the better for it.

NERD ALERT: Mirror Neurons

Mirror neurons connect our bodies to other people's bodies by replicating what they are going through or feeling by firing off in our own brains a model of what we imagine they are feeling.

Imagine that you are walking along a beautiful summer path beside a lovely rippling creek. You are centered and breathing deeply as you take in the scenery. Then a woman on a bike is coming up behind you, and as she moves to pass you, her tire catches a rock. She is then thrown from the

handlebars onto the cement sidewalk, where she skids across the pavement on her bare knee and upper leg and then flops onto her palms, and the impact jolts her head forward to crash her chin against the ground. She is covered in blood and road rash.

What happens in your body when you witness this? Most likely you feel shivers in your body along the same areas that she just received road rashes. Your mirror neurons are firing inside your brain and re-creating her experience inside your body so that you can learn something.

Mirror neurons are responsible for the evolution of the human species in a myriad of ways, from expediting the learning process (humans can learn by just watching without ever doing) to increasing our capacity to hold empathy for others.

Mirror neurons fire off when we are actively watching anyone do anything. That's why commercials that showcase people eating food are more effective at gaining sales than commercials that simply showcase pictures of said food.

These neurons also fire off when someone is escalated or angry. In a parenting situation, that means that our children's intense emotions are being replicated in our psyche while we watch our toddlers pound their fists or our teenagers send contemptuous glares our way. We can "catch" what they are feeling in our →

bodies and lose connection to the regulated state we were in previous to their meltdown.

When we catch our kids' dysregulation and don't stop to calm ourselves and reconnect to our

previously regulated body state, we can get reactive and enter a control-focused state. Their teen or toddler tantrum comes out from our adult bodies with our dictator voice and big posture, and words like: “That’s enough! This is unacceptable!” This, of course, just adds to the chaos of our child’s emotional dysregulation. Then their mirror neurons will refire as they watch us lose it. And on it goes. Around and around the tantrum mobile.

Unless.

Unless we breathe. Calm our heartbeats. Remind ourselves that we are, in fact, the grown-up in this situation and we can handle feelings.

Then our children can catch our calmness in their mirror neurons. Instead of us catching their tantrums and attitudes, if we calm our body state, their mirror neurons can borrow our state of mind. The calmer we become, the calmer they become, and the calmer we become, and now we’re going around the magical co-regulation mobile instead.

Thank you, mirror neurons.

EMOTION TRAINING

Teaching our children how to effectively release their emotions is a lot like effective potty training. When we potty train, we are teaching children to notice and label the sensations they experience for peeing and pooping. When we finally decide to take off their diapers, we pay close attention to them and learn their signals, noticing when they grab their loins or do a potty dance, or when they quietly head to the corner of the room and stand still for more than twenty seconds.

We then help them to make the connection between their body cues (tingling in their bladder or urethra, or movements in their bowels) and the underlying need to urinate or defecate. It takes time and repetition from us to help them master these skills on their own. Once they can notice the sensations and label them with words like "I have to pee," they are then able to translate their awareness into action: "Go to the potty, pull down my pants, and pee! Then wipe and flush (without using an entire roll of toilet paper in the process, *please*)!"

Just like our children need us to help them learn the steps for potty training, they need our help to learn the steps for emotion regulation. They need us to recognize that their face got crinkly with disgust, or their eyes are watery with tears, or their fists are balled up in anger. When they learn to pay attention to their emotional sensations, they can then accurately label them ("I am sad") and then learn to use effective coping and communication skills to get what they need. As they age and experience this process over and over and over again, they learn how to follow these steps adaptively and intuitively.

The five steps for "secure emotion training" our children need us to teach them:

- Notice the emotions (pick up on body sensations)
- Name the emotions (you look like you're feeling sad, scared, angry, etc.)
- Let the emotions out (cry, usually, but also growl or huff)
- Wipe (tears, boogers, messes made in the process)
- Relief (melt together in a hug, lean in, etc.)

If we want our children to be resilient and emotionally mature, they need to be able to identify their sensations/emotions, label them accurately and specifically, and then let them out with us. Sometimes, after letting them

out, they need to wipe up and flush, because our feelings usually come out as boogers and tears.

Of course, it's *way* more complicated than potty training. With potty training, there are only two sensations to learn (poo and pee) and one appropriate response to them (take to the toilet!), but with emotion training, there are hundreds of nuanced sensations that need words and countless positive and appropriate ways to regulate.

The other major difference from potty training is that, in secure emotion training, our goal is not for our children to learn how to do it alone. Bless that glorious landmark when our children can independently wipe their own rear. In emotional needs, it would be heartbreaking if our children learned to believe they should wipe away their tears alone in private.

Resilience is a result of a person learning how to become successfully *interdependent.*

THE BIG FEELS

There are potentially countless human emotions. The nuance of the various ways we feel is truly complex and can make emotional learning feel overwhelming. To simplify this concept, I am going to highlight five core emotions that we need to be able to identify and understand with great familiarity in order to move toward higher levels of emotional competence and confidence.

Joy. Fear. Sorrow. Anger. Shame.

Now, imagine that each of these core emotions has a drop-down menu with selections for intensity. There is a spectrum of each emotion that is hundreds of emotions long.

- Joy (which is about fulfillment) has a spectrum ranging from *content* to *elated.*

- Fear (which is about safety) has a spectrum ranging from *uneasy* to *terrified.*
- Sorrow (which is about loss) has a spectrum ranging from *bummed* to *devastated*.
- Anger (which is about violation) has a spectrum ranging from *irritated* to *enraged*.
- Shame (which is about worthiness) has a spectrum ranging from *sheepish* to *mortified.*

Once you get the core meaning of each of these five emotions, you can begin to learn the nuances of the higher and lower levels of that emotion and the correlating words we use to describe them.

The more words we have to describe our emotional states and needs, the more we are able to cope with them. Words are a part of understanding our feelings *and* sharing them with others. If someone has no words or limited words for an emotion, they are not able to complete the natural cycle of letting feelings out. Emotional impaction occurs when someone cannot talk about what they feel. The feelings get stuck up inside, and that is not good for emotional health.

Once we have helped our children truly identify their emotional states and then label those states with words, we are next focused on helping them truly learn to communicate the emotions with us.

Our goal is to teach our children to reach for others when they are in distress so that they are able to create a lifelong pattern of reaching out instead of shutting down or freaking out. This means developing a habit of offering them empathy and support when they share their honest emotional reactions with you.

Children who do not receive empathy when they emote learn to stop emoting. This is not emotion regulation, this is

emotional stuffing. It is a result of feeling that their emotions are behavioral problems they should get under control.

When our children are small, there is a temptation to put the cart before the horse. Our children's feelings can be *very* inconvenient, *very* big, and sometimes, frankly, annoying. Especially in social contexts, where we are trying to do more than one thing at once. Like grocery shop. Or connect with family at a gathering. Or get out the freakin' door to get to school.

We flip the order of things and try to teach them to regulate what they feel before they even fully understand what they are feeling. The process of raising emotionally resilient children does not always mesh with the highly scheduled go-go-go culture most of us live in.

When our kids are small, their problems can seem small. Like the amount of grief that can come when you say no to a popsicle. It is tempting to try to get that child to regulate that feeling or stuff that feeling instead of using that moment to teach them about what they feel. But the truth is that if we can't handle our child's grief over a popsicle, they will internalize that and, eventually, when they are faced with more complex feelings, like the feelings of self-disgust that can trigger eating disorders or, worse, suicidal thoughts that can trigger attempts on their life, they are not likely to trust in your ability to help them.

Our little ones have big feelings over small things, so we can teach them what their feelings are, how to listen to them, and how deeply they matter to us. Then they know far better what to do and how to use us when life hands them and us big, messy, complicated things.

When we offer empathy to our children, it teaches them that their feelings are not threats, that they are worthy of

connection, and that empathy is a powerful tool for relieving pain.

Empathetic people are made through the experience of receiving repeated empathy from others. The more empathy we give our children, the more they will instinctively give empathy to others. All societal growth involves the power of empathy.

As you are reading this, you may be realizing that you have a lot of work to do. Maybe you realize that there is a lack in one area of emotional intelligence for you, or maybe you haven't had a ton of empathy given to you, so you aren't quite sure how to do it. I want you to take a deep breath and not panic. You can do this. You are wired for emotional connection.

Yes, as a parental ideal, you would start these habits as soon as your babies are in your arms. But we aren't all afforded that privilege. Sometimes our children come to our arms when they are older (through adoption or fostering), or we learn about emotional connection after they have passed through their early years and we have already formed some patterns of emotional disconnection. I know brave and wise parents who didn't learn these skills until they were grandparents and who deeply altered the generations below them as a result of the changes they made. We can always work on the quality of our emotional connection with our children, no matter their ages or ours.

Whether you are reading this while your child is still in your womb or already outside of your home, the process of gaining emotional intelligence and connection is wise and honorable work. When we understand what we are feeling and what to do with it, we are freed up to live present, connected, and meaningful lives, no matter what circumstances come our way.

OUR FACES ARE MIRRORS

Humans need other humans to keep our nervous systems regulated. Especially in childhood. What does that mean? It means that our instinct to form close relationships is an integral part of healthy brain development and functioning. All children need help feeling safe and returning to calm after they have been flooded with emotions. (P.S. We do too!)

One of the primary ways researchers have identified that this regulation occurs is through a relational interaction called "mirroring."

When a child (or anyone) is dysregulated and feeling emotional pain in our presence, whether that is sadness, shame, anger, or fear, mirroring occurs when we allow our nervous system to "catch" and recognize what they are feeling, and then communicate that received feeling state through expression on our face.

They make a sad face, we show our care and concern on our face in return.

What gets expressed through our faces then affects what happens inside our child's body. If we are able to offer mirroring that is in tune with their emotional state, it helps their neural firing to calm.

This is hugely important in infancy and early childhood because it creates felt safety in the relationship. The child feels reassured by the experience of being received emotionally. It also helps a child to develop self-awareness. The mirroring reflects to the child that their internal state is real and can be felt by others.

Tuning In to the Right Station

In attachment research, when we talk about how to "read" a child's emotional state, the most commonly used term to

describe the skill is “attunement,” but it is also often referred to as “parental sensitivity.”

Attunement/parental sensitivity both refer to a parent’s ability to *read their child’s nonverbal cues* and *effectively feel their emotional state without getting flooded by it.* These are *necessary* skills for building secure attachments. We should accurately “catch” our child’s emotional state and mirror it in a way that creates soothing.

The opposite of attunement is very creatively termed “misattunement” and refers to times when a parent completely misses or inaccurately reads a child’s emotional state and responds in a way that is either *overwhelming and intrusive* or *dismissive* of their pain. If we mirror with a dysregulated intense response, or if we mirror with an inadequate or blank response, it can actually increase dysregulation for our child.

Think of a time when you were sad. Really sad. Tears-coming-up, belly-full-of-aches kind of sad. Okay, you got one? (To all my avoidant folks, this may take a minute, but we all have one). Now imagine that someone close to you comes up and asks you, “What’s wrong?” You then cry and tell them about the sadness. They tear up listening to your story. Then they offer you a hug and sit with you while you cry it out until you slowly start to feel some relief.

That is an emotional experience where someone is attuned to you.

Now imagine the same sadness. This time, someone you care about comes up and immediately tells you, “Don’t cry.” Then they remind you about all of the good things you have in your life and they awkwardly smile at you and ask you to “cheer up.” So you offer a fake smile and say, “You’re right, so many people have it worse.” You never tell your story in its fullness, and you never get the tears all the way out. Instead of

feeling relieved of your sorrow, you now feel ashamed of having felt it in the first place.

Or, even worse, you are crying and you reach for your partner and ask them to comfort you, and instead of comforting you, they *blank face* you. They say some words like, "You'll be fine," but they give you no facial recognition of your pain.

That is *mis*attunement. When someone does not know how to read, receive, and respond to your emotional needs and therefore leaves you to grapple with your dysregulation internally and alone.

On the flip side of that is a misattunement that comes in with emotional intrusiveness. The person starts hyperventilating in tears about your tears. They are so worried about you that they start having a panic attack themselves. They overread your emotional dysregulation and add their own to the moment.

Not soothing either. Attunement is that Goldilocks level of response—not too hot, not too cold, in sync with the person feeling the feelings.

Review

MISATTUNEMENT

- Parent under-responds or overresponds to a child's tender emotional state
- Parent gives a response that is distancing or dismissive of the emotions the child is feeling, or a response that is activating and overwhelming to the child

NERD ALERT: The Still Face Experiment

In 1975, Ed Tronick created the Still Face Experiment, where he invited mother and baby pairs to an experiment where the mother was asked to initially respond to their child's bids for connection while the child was secured in a high chair and looking at them (e.g., talking to them, looking where they pointed, matching facial expressions) and then, when cued, to turn around, make their face blank, and look back at their child with a completely neutral and nonresponsive still face for three minutes (e.g., sit in disconnection).

This may sound mild to the adult brain: "How is giving a child a blank face for a few minutes such a big deal?"

But babies, when faced with this loss of connection, do everything in their power to try to get their parent to reengage. They start by trying to get engagement from their parent with bids for connection like smiling or pointing, and then they protest and start to melt down, and then, within only three minutes of this disconnection, we see these babies enter despair and shut down.

I often show these clips to my adult clients to help them cue in to how incredibly important emotional mirroring and connection is for our brains. I've never had a client watch these short clips without significant discomfort or tears. They are painful to witness.

This need for facial responsiveness and emotional mirroring does not end in infancy either. It is the same need we have to be acknowledged emotionally with empathy throughout all stages of development, including adulthood.

> The Still Face Experiment put into tangible terms what the early attachment researchers had already theorized: that the dance of emotional connection and attunement is hugely important to how well regulated a child's nervous system can be.

ATTUNEMENT

- Parent accurately catches the emotion of a child feeling tender/dysregulated
- Parent accurately communicates support and reassuring, calm presence to the child, which helps them express their feelings and then stabilize and regulate

Things that muck up attunement and co-regulation:

- Not knowing the physical sensations and facial expressions affiliated with emotions
- Not spending any time exploring or feeling our own emotions
- Telling our child they are "fine" every time they show emotions
- A family culture of avoidance or overwhelming and out-of-control emotions
- Things that increase attunement skills:
- A solid foundational understanding of emotions in general
- An understanding of our own body's emotional cues
- A solid foundational understanding of our child's emotional cues
- A strong family culture of vulnerability and pro-emotion belief

The Myth of the Blank Face

There is a rumor going around the parenting mill that if we make a blank face in response to our upset baby or child, it will help them to calm down (or keep them from getting more upset). And like most rumors, this rumor is not backed up by science and makes a conclusion without understanding all the facts.

When we mirror our children's emotional states back to them, they will often *release* more of their emotions with us. This doesn't mean they *are* more upset. It means they are more externally expressive of their upset feelings.

When we acknowledge their feelings by mirroring their emotional state on our face or in our tone, it connects them to us, allowing them to fully let the feelings out because they sense we can hold and understand what they are feeling.

The acknowledgment of their feelings on our faces through empathy triggers a cathartic release of pain. This is important because it means that they are processing their pain instead of swallowing it.

So, when our children are sad, they need us to make an empathetic facial expression that mirrors their sadness. Same with all the other feels.

This concept usually feels instinctive to people who grew up in emotionally connected homes, but feels abstract and confusing to those who did not. But the more we practice it and see it as a necessary part of connecting with our children, the more the magic of it shapes our children and their relationships with us.

It's also a progressive experience. The more consistently we mirror their emotional states on our faces, the more our children will anticipate that mirror and the less panic they will encounter around their feelings. The repetition of this is huge. The more encounters of empathy and co-regulation our children have, the more effective the intervention becomes.

And no, it will not make our children pathologically dependent on us. It makes them more connected to us, which, in turn, helps them feel more confident to leave our side and explore the world with confidence as they grow.

The next time your child cries, go give them your full attention, let them see on your face the feelings they are working through in their body, reassure them that their feelings are valid and that you are not overwhelmed by them. That you are there with your surfboard helping them learn how to surf their feelings.

Anger Is Not Danger

Anger is a feeling. A feeling that can feel scary, both for the person experiencing it and for the person seeing it in someone else. But just like all of the other feelings, it has a purpose, and when understood and received, it guides us toward each other.

If you have had close encounters with people who have abusive mindsets (i.e. “I should get what I want when I want it and if I don’t then I am justified to lash out however I please”), it can be hard to believe that anger is safe. If you have been in a relationship with someone infected with the disease of abuse, then you have seen very clearly how anger + abusive mindsets can transform into danger.

But weaponized anger is no longer anger, it is violence.

This is very important to note because if we don’t separate violence from anger, then we might shut down our children’s very natural need to express anger in healthy ways.

Anger is the emotion that signals to us and to others that we are feeling desperate or violated about something. It is a lighthouse letting us know where the shore is so that we don’t fatally crash on the rocks.

When our children are angry, they need our empathy, not our rebuke. The more we are able to receive their anger, the

more they will be able to understand it and therefore manage it. If we teach our children that anger is bad behavior, they cannot mature and either have to 1) blow their anger to bigger proportions to be heard or 2) internalize their anger and aim it at themselves.

When our children are feeling angry, whether that is at us, or at someone else, or even at themselves, our job is to use their anger to find the rocky shore so they can steer toward safety and rest. Where is the hurt? Where is the fear? Where is the shame or sorrow?

If we can remind ourselves about times we were angry as a child and needed someone to help us see the shore, we can stay calm enough to offer support instead of rejecting their angry feelings.

When our children are young, anger is extremely overwhelming to their nervous system and they are not able to process it while they are in the experience. Our job is to keep them as safe as possible (remove sharp objects), but also covered in compassion, “I hear how upset you are about this. This feels terrible to you. I am here. I got you. We will get through this together.”

Anger often initiates the instinct to run into another room and take space, and that’s okay. I use the “give space, but stay available” approach. If my child runs to their room in anger I give them a minute or so head start and then I gently approach their door and say something like, “I am so sorry you are feeling so angry, do you want me to come in to be with you?” and if they say yes, they are usually already through the storm and ready to be held and to then process what happened. If they say no? They are still surging with those intense neural chemicals and I tell them calmly, “That’s totally okay. I will be right outside the door whenever you need me and I will check on you again in a couple of minutes.”

If we want our children to be teens and adults who can manage their anger, then we need to be parents who manage our own anger and are able to receive and empathize with theirs. Is it easy? Heck no. But in the end, it is truly rewarding to learn together about the shape of their shore and where they need our support to get their boats safely back to dock.

Our Emotional Coping Is Their Emotional Guidebook

I was with a good friend at a pizza restaurant the other week, and she was cracking up telling me a story about her three-year-old Markine. They had come home from a long day at the zoo, where her daughter had multiple big meltdowns, and the little munchkin got out of her car seat, stretched her arms, yawned, and said, "Mom, I need some TLC."

Her mother giggled at her mature syntax and then asked her, "Markine, what do you think 'TLC' means?"

"Extra candy and the iPad," she replied with a cheeky grin.

Adorable.

Where did this little person come up with the notion that she should get some extra rest and care after a hard day? She didn't make it up on her own. She absorbed it from the messages in her environment and especially those from her caregivers.

The message that Markine had internalized about having an emotional day was healthy: I should take extra good care of myself when I feel emotionally exhausted.

Unfortunately, so many of us absorbed far more problematic messages:

- I shouldn't cry.
- I shouldn't take up so much space.

- My body exists to please others.
- My pain is annoying.
- My needs are too much.
- My desires are selfishness.
- My sorrow is weakness.
- Something is wrong with me.

NERD ALERT: Limbic Resonance

The neurobiological term for attunement, "limbic resonance," means that a caregiver's brain is lighting up in the emotional region at the same time that the child's brain is doing so.

When we experience limbic resonance with others, it leads to feeling felt by them. This experience helps us calm and regulate.

It sometimes helps me when I am out of sync with one of my children to imagine how their brain might be lighting up with feelings, and I try to make sure that I am allowing my brain to also light up in those same regions enough for them to feel that resonance, but not so much for them to feel flooded by my feelings.

Next time someone genuinely offers you empathy and emotional connection, you can impress their socks off by thanking them for the limbic resonance!

How do we prevent accidentally spreading these messages? By working to replace those messages with messages of care to both ourselves and our children:

- It's good to cry it out, let it all out when you need it.

- It takes courage to share our feelings—thank you for trusting me with yours. We have to take care of ourselves so we can be healthy and well, and sometimes that means we disappoint other people.
- My pain is valid and so is yours.
- Needs draw us closer to each other.
- It is lovely to notice and seek what we desire.
- It is beautiful to share our sorrow with others.

I want to be clear: No one can enter a constant kumbaya state with their children. That's horse doo-doo. Every parent and child is destined to have seasons of strife and struggle. And engaging our children's emotions can feel *exhausting* at times.

But there are choices we can make as parents to help minimize the fallout from those emotional moments or seasons and even use those moments to increase our closeness with and understanding of ourselves and our kids.

We ain't gonna be perfect, but at least we can be connected.

I read once in an old book of wisdom that *love covers a multitude of sins,* and I can tell you that, in the parent-child attachment dynamic, that is true, hands down.

What is love? Love is connection and synchronicity with someone we are close to. Love is the experience of someone staying close to us no matter how big or gnarly our feelings get, and still seeing us with dignity and adoration.

When kids feel emotionally connected, especially in their lows and highs, they can look over all of our parental misgivings and still feel securely attached to us. They don't have to feel ambivalent or insecure about their pain or needs

existing, and can simply ask for help when they are feeling their feelings.

From now until the day I head to the great beyond, this is my greatest hope. That my kids will feel emotionally connected to me and deeply loved as a result. That they will feel good about reaching for me when they are emotionally tender and need support, and that they will, in turn, develop a lifelong habit of reaching for others when they need to. Anything else I do as a parent—well, it's a bonus.

FIVE

The Self-Confidence Recipe

Human beings develop our sense of self in the context of our relationships to others. Whether or not we feel confident about our "selves" is largely determined by the relational experiences that were happening while we were developing our sense of self. When I am teaching parents or therapists about child development, I say: "Human beings are a 'we' before we become a 'me.' "

A child can only become confident in their self if they are first able to be confident in the care of others.

When we feel securely adored, understood, and supported in an attachment relationship, those experiences internalize into positive narratives about ourselves.

Adoration and delight translate to: "I am worthy of love and connection."

Emotional responsiveness translates to: "My needs matter."

Calm compassionate care in hard moments translates to: "It is okay to make mistakes."

Consistent attuned attention translates to: "My presence and my voice are valuable."

When our children are fresh out of the oven, they do not have a cognitive sense of self. Babies cannot cognitively reflect on or fully comprehend their existence. They primarily live in a feeling state. So their sense of "self" is very much in relation to us and the ways we soothe and regulate them. This is what I refer to as the stage of "we-ness." This is a very important part of development, as it is one of the largest leaps

of brain growth. In fact, by the time a child is three years old, they have developed more than 80 percent of their total brain mass.

As their brain starts to thicken, they develop more capacity for cognition and thinking and processing the world around them in relation to themselves. After this, they move on to the stage of "me-ness." This me-ness stage is an integral part of developing confidence. It is when children start saying "mine" and "I want" and "no" and pushing boundaries and exploring the world with delight and some independence. No longer strapped to a high chair, they are figuring out what it feels like to have some autonomy and choice. Sometimes cute, sometimes not-so-cute.

This early self-focus is not a sign of narcissism to come. It is a part of their growth and learning process. When we give our children the opportunity to focus on what they feel and want and think, in safe ways, of course, we are allowing them to become experts on themselves, which is the key to gaining self-confidence.

The parenting challenge is to support the self-confidence of a child in the me-ness stage while also keeping them alive. We have to simultaneously validate their feelings while redirecting the ways they express them. "I see how much you love to use your scissors, but we don't run when we're carrying scissors."

The other night, one of my three-year-olds boldly proclaimed that she was going to jump off the bathroom counter without anyone catching her. I love the fact that she felt excited about something, but I did not love the fact that what she was excited about would have resulted in a trip to the ER. I went to the counter and said, "I love that you want to do something so exciting and brave, but it is my job to keep you safe, and jumping from this high onto a hard surface could

really hurt you. Let's get you one last jump on the couch, where you can fly and land safely."

The formula for responding to our child's internal state while redirecting their external choices goes like this: "I see you are feeling _____ and that you want _____. Those things are fun/nice/tasty. We can't do _____ because of _____, but let's try _____, which is a smarter/safer/healthier version of _____, so that you can still feel _____."

When we are attuning to our children, and connecting with them through their emotional highs and lows, we are helping them build a sense of their presence in the world. The body sensations that lead them to giggle or to cry become valid to them when we acknowledge them and respond to them.

I often get asked, "Won't my child learn to be inherently selfish if I am always responding to them, giving them attention and empathy for what they feel?" Which is a legitimately important question. I think we can all agree that the world is not in need of more self-obsessed grown-ups who lack the capacity for empathy and awareness of others. Let's clear up some confusion around what self-confidence *is* and *is not* and the nuances around the dynamics that help to cultivate it.

ATTENTION! ATTENTION!

Let's debunk the myth that giving kids loving attention when they are emotional or want our attention will turn them into obnoxious and needy adults. It's a *myth* and a misunderstanding of human development.

I promise. Positive attention won't harm your child's development.

Negative attention sure can, though. Shaming our children for their emotions leaves them feeling bad about themselves,

which makes it harder for them to regulate. Telling our children they are disappointing us by having a meltdown? Leaves them feeling uncomfortable about coming to us with their tender emotional states. Scaring our children into silence when they are crying? Makes it nearly impossible for them to trust us with their needs and authentic self. Negative attention erodes trust between us and them, damaging their instinct to run to us in times of need and growth.

And if we ignore our children as a tactic when they are emotionally dysregulated? We are leaving them to conclude that their pain must not be worthy of our attention. To be ignored is to feel invisible, to not know whether you (or some part of you) truly deserves connection and support from others.

Let's dig into why and how we can offer our children secure attention.

Children who receive consistent and attuned attention = secure and regulated grown-ups.

At the very beginning of a child's life, we are drawn to giving our infants our attention through the simple act of gazing at them. Taking the time to gaze at our little babes helps us to study them and learn their cues, and it helps them to feel protected and secure. This is one reason we often feel compelled to gaze at our babies while they are doing incredibly routine things like feeding or sleeping. This instinct serves the purpose of helping us to study our children closely enough to know when their demeanor changes, and it also deepens our sense of love and attachment to our children.

> **PARENTING PERSPECTIVE**
>
> **One of These Things Is Not Like the Other**
>
> We don't all have the privilege of getting to match our families. For me, as a mixed-Chinese American

> woman, that meant that I did not grow up looking like my Irish-German mother or my transracial adopted sister. Now as a mother and a stepmother, I don't look like my stepchildren, and I also don't share their gender or sexual identities/orientations.
>
> How can we create connection in areas where our children are different from us? I know that as a biracial person growing up, I wrestled deeply with my sense of belonging. I needed my home to be a place where I could freely talk about identity and my experiences of it.
>
> Our children need to know that they belong with us, even when they don't match us. True belonging comes from being met with curiosity, openness, and willingness to learn. They need us to ask the question, "what is it like for you to be you?" instead of being threatened and scared by differences. Our children need us to see differences as opportunities for discovery, greater trust, and connection.
>
> — ABBY WONG-HEFFTER, mixed-Chinese American, trauma and attachment psychotherapist, mom, stepmom, and sister of a transracial adoptee

As a baby goes from being a slug (no offense, zero- to eight-weekers) to developing into an interactive being, this gaze becomes even more important, because the child becomes aware of a parent's attentiveness.

They look up at you when a light is flickering to see if you see it too. They stare at you intensely and curl those tiny lips right before bursting into tears to see if you noticed them bump their arm on the counter and therefore also see their pain and sadness. And the most fun of all, they play peekaboo to see if you notice them disappearing and reappearing right before your very eyes. *Our gaze and attention validate their*

presence in the world and, more complexly, their experiences of the world.

When my daughter Remi was a one-year-old, she was *obsessed* with animals. I am talking about Steve-Irwin-in-diapers level of obsession. She never met a furry or scurrying being that she didn't love. She would chase after them and try to hug them, and if they consented, she would definitely open-mouth kiss them with her whole heart.

This joy was something organic that she was born with; it was inside of her and coming from her. Honestly, my husband and I are both chill-cats-only types of people, so I can say with certainty that her zoological predilection wasn't something we cultivated or influenced.

But despite this joy being something entirely her own, she still needed us to bear witness to her delights in order to validate them and make them real. Whenever an animal sparked her joy—a roly-poly, a butterfly, a doggie on the street—she would shriek with delight and then turn to us immediately to see if we were watching and noticing. Did we see it? Her little eyes would beam with hopefulness toward us.

When we joined her with attention and empathy ("I see it too! That puppy is adorable!"), she would get a double dose of joy. One part puppy, the other part having her parents join her in the puppy delight.

Of course, sometimes these creature encounters would happen when I was trying to respond to an email or was lost in thought about something happening later that day. I would do that half-assed parent engagement thing, where I would glance in her direction and say, "Oh wow," and then return as quickly as possible to whatever task or thought actually had my attention.

Remi wasn't satisfied with my pretend attentiveness. It was upsetting to her.

She wanted my true attention. She needed it, actually. And so, she would start to melt down or yell my name over and over until I put my phone down and truly showed up for her. She needed me to *feel* what she was feeling, see what she was seeing, and catch those feelings inside my own body alongside her.

She needed my gaze, my attention, and my emotional attunement. She needed mirroring.

Even adults need this. Anyone share an important story with someone else only to be given the half-assed equivalent of "oh wow"? Ouchie. If you are human, it hurts when important people aren't paying attention to your important stuff. And it doesn't matter if it is a tiny bug or something big that is really bugging you; whatever it is that matters to you needs attention from the people closest to you.

Many of the families I work with are wrestling with the strong cultural belief that if we pay too much attention to our children, they will become self-centered little bratzillas and gaze at their navels for the rest of their lives. A truly scary thought.

Two big facts for you to help with this very big fear:

The more attuned attention you give to a child, the less selfish they will be as an adult. Not the other way around.

Experiences of empathy and connection breed increased empathy- and connection-focused worldviews later on.

True pathological self-centeredness is a real problem, of course. People who can't see anyone or anything beyond themselves and are stuck in a pattern of obsession about their own thoughts and feelings are miserable to be in relationship with. They do not experience relational fulfillment or security. They are emotionally and relationally delayed and stuck in a pattern of perpetual dissatisfaction.

Ironically, the people who struggle to focus on the needs of others struggle because they were *not* given the tender attention and connection that they needed as children. They may have had a parent who gave them *everything they wanted materially,* but that is not the same as having a parent give them *what they needed emotionally.* Truly selfish personality types are stuck in an earlier stage of development, trying to meet a need that was unmet when they were teeny-tiny. It is an attachment wound that renders them obsessed with themselves and unable to launch into the next stage of reciprocity and mutual love and support.

When children get their emotional and physical needs met, they are freed up to move on to new stages of development.

The more emotional attunement you get as a child, the less of a bum hole you become as an adult.

For children to develop into adults who are compassionate, empathetic, thoughtful, and generous, they first have to be given those things and taught that their inner experiences are *real* and *matter to you.* It is only then that they can transfer that learning into believing that the inner experiences of others are real and should matter to them.

Now, this is the part where well-meaning cycle breakers often get confused.

People who want their kids to feel loved and secure will mistakenly think I am saying that we should let our children have whatever they want when they are upset and dysregulated. *Please do not do that.* That will not help them develop and grow. It will make them dependent on consumerism to regulate.

When I suggest we mirror our children's emotional states and respond with attunement to help them co-regulate, I am not suggesting that we follow them around with vats of candy and iPads as servants to their every request. *Children's*

requests are often unrelated to their needs. Why? Because they are still learning how to identify their needs.

What I am suggesting, and what the research validates, is that it is adaptive to put in significant effort to be attentive with our children by being responsive and available in regards to their bids for connection, both in joy and in pain. This helps them to believe in their inner experiences and to find language to share it with others.

This is a process. Early on, they will need significant help from us to regulate their bodies. Just as they need significant help from us to eat and toilet at the beginning. But if we are able to adequately respond to their needs, their dependency will evolve over time as they grow and change.

When our littles are first born, our job is to attend to every single need as soon as possible. It is the season of *yes, yes, yes.* You want to be held? Yes. You want to be fed? Yes. You want to be picked up? *Yes, yes, yes!* Which is, of course, why parents of newborns are so stinking tired.

Eventually, though, these littles get bigger, and the season of yes becomes sprinkled with many new no's. They roll and then crawl and then walk. They are able to tolerate things like, "wait one minute" and "it's not your turn yet." And because they seem to have some prewired instinct to put their fingers into sockets and doorjambs, they also need to become familiar with protective no's: "No, you cannot jump off that banister. No, you cannot have that chokeable candy. No, you cannot jump headfirst into the pond at the park."

This is where the process of being emotionally available to our children gets much trickier. Because they really, really want many things that we know aren't good for them. Because sometimes their joy (light socket!) and their needs (safety) aren't aligned.

When my girls were toddlers, we had a dishwasher door that was determined to stay open. In order to close it, you had to do a full Wayne Gretzky kind of hip check against it. One day, I failed to give it the full hip, and it opened up and gave my twin toddlers access to all of the dirty dishes while I was on the other side of the counter.

After a few minutes of silence, I looked around the corner to see Remi running full speed ahead with two steak knives in her hands pointed to the ceiling in a Xena, the Warrior Princess, kind of stance.

Luckily I was able to intervene before she literally knifed her own eyes out or stabbed her sister for sport. Unluckily it made her heart extremely sad to have said knives removed from her possession.

Little Remi balled her eyes out and pounded her little fists into the ground in deep, true mourning of the sharp objects she had lost.

She needed me. Not to give her the knives back but to give her compassion and words to explain the acute pain in her body. She needed my attention, my mirroring, and my clear and grounded presence of mind.

"You are so sad that Mommy took the knives away."

"I am so sorry you're feeling so upset and so sad."

"You were having so much fun with the knives and you want them back, but Mommy is saying no."

As I stayed available for her, she was able to calm down, and *then,* and only then, I could teach her about why knives are dangerous and why I was saying no to her holding them. I gave her a ton of attention and care, and guess what happened the next time she saw a knife?

"Owie," she said. She got it. She also got that her feelings were valid and real and have words that go with them. When

she loses other things now, she can come to me and say, “Remi sad.”

As a therapist, I have known countless full-grown adults who don’t have as many skills as my preschoolers do in terms of emotional understanding, communication, and compassion. When they did something dangerous or “wrong,” they were scolded or shamed or punished. When they cried? They were given longer punishments or harsher responses.

In the same scenario, they may have been yelled at or even spanked. Instead of learning limits at the same time as they were learning their feelings, they simply learned that they were being bad. And that lesson? It leaks. Into one’s identity, one’s relationships, and inevitably into one’s confidence that if they reach out to others, they will be cared for.

So, when you are afraid to give your child attention because you don’t want them to become attention-seeking selfish ding-dongs, remember this:

I am giving my children attention so that they believe that their feelings and needs are *real* and have names, and so that they will also believe that other people’s feelings are real and have names. Paying attention to my child in their emotional moments is how they will learn to be resilient (care for themselves) and compassionate (care for others).

My attention is not a luxury; it belongs to them in the same way that they belong with me.

CONFIDENCE IS NOT ARROGANCE

Confidence is a trust in self. A set of beliefs about ourselves that leads us to a place of regulation and motivation. Confidence says, “I am worthy of safety, kindness, and connection. I have value to offer the people and world around me.” Confidence leads us to be clear on what we want and need, what relationships we want to be in, and the ways we

want to live in the world. It gives us the gusto to take actions toward our desires, dreams, and goals. We want this for our children.

Arrogance, on the other hand, is a *lack of trust in others.* It is a set of beliefs about ourselves that leads us to consider ourselves above others, and not in connection with them. Arrogance says, "I am more worthy of good things than other people. There is a hierarchy of human value, and *I* am on top." Arrogance motivates people, and it can be a gusto drive toward dreams and goals too, but it does so without authentic connection along the way. While confidence drives us forward *with* other people alongside us, arrogance encourages us to drive forward *over* other people around us so that we can "win."

Arrogance might seem like a stronger version of confidence, but it is actually far more fragile. Confidence can withstand failure and loss because it does not isolate us from support and vulnerable connection, so when the hard times fall, confidence allows us to lean on others and build back our sense of resilience. Whereas, if hard times fall on arrogance, the only companions in sight are self-contempt and depression.

Idealization and Humiliation

Arrogance usually develops one of three ways:

Someone is idealized by their caregivers in ways that feed their internal narrative of superiority. The parents who idealize their children mistakenly believe they are giving their children positive feedback. Often, they had parents who were demeaning and cruel, and so they are doing the opposite without realizing that it is undermining confidence. Telling our children that they are special or exceptional or better than others does not give them confidence; it gives them a complex. They now need to be superior in order to feel worthy.

Someone is demeaned by their caregivers and develops arrogance as a false sense of confidence in defense of themselves. Parents who humiliate or dominate their children usually do so because they mistakenly believe it is their job to teach a child to submit to authority. “I am right and you are wrong” is a form of arrogance, and some children will inherit the mindset and use it themselves later on.

Someone is raised by caregivers who are themselves stuck in arrogant mindsets, and they essentially “catch” the mindset from being inculcated in it.

I want everyone to clearly understand that when we invest in our children and respond to their emotional needs, we are not idealizing them or putting them at risk of developing a toxic sense of self-focus. Different things.

NERD ALERT: The Negative Mechanics of Praising Our Children

Stanford psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck is responsible for discovering what Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman brilliantly refer to as “The inverse power of praise” in their book, *NurtureShock.*

Dweck and her colleagues recognized that children who were given praise for “being smart” had poorer self-esteem than children who were instead given praise for their specific efforts, habits, and approaches to learning.

If “I am smart” and I fail, does that now mean that “I am dumb, or no longer smart”? Those are high stakes. Instead of giving a child the confidence for effective studying skills, they get frozen in panic and spend less time learning and more time worrying.

By trying to encourage our children saying things like, “Great job tonight, you are good at basketball,” or “That painting is perfect! You are truly an artist.” We accidentally infuse our children with identity anxiety.

Instead, if we can give them specific positive feedback on the efforts it took for them to achieve something, it helps them to focus on learning instead of trying to prove they are smart.

Carol Dweck says the ideal is encouraging a “growth mindset” where kids are invested in continuing to grow (intelligence is developed), rather than a “fixed mindset” where intelligence is static. Encouraging a growth mindset in our children sounds more like this:

“I see how much time you put into learning your spelling words! Well done!”

“I know you’ve been practicing your jump shot in your free time, and it really showed when you were on the court tonight!”

“I love watching your creative process and how you keep trying new ways to make art!”

Adoration and Delight in Bulk

While idealization is harmful to children, adoration and delight are the opposite. They are like fertilizer to a child’s positive self-concept. If our goal is to give our children confidence, then we need to give adoration and express delight in Costco-size quantities. Daily. Notice I did not say we should tell them they are perfect, or that they can do no wrong, or to put them on a pedestal. I said: *adore them.* When we adore a child, we are showering them with love and affection and delight.

Think of what it feels like when a dog greets their owner after time apart. Imagine that unadulterated delight that emanates from their wagging tail and slobbery smile. It is nearly impossible not to feel it, right? I believe that is why we call them “man’s best friend,” because there is something entirely magical about a relationship where we know with 100 percent certainty that someone is delighted to be near us. This type of relationship experience helps us to feel delightful and worthy and wanted.

When I was growing up, my paternal grandparents did this for me. There was this particular pitch in their voice when I came over to their house, and wide-open arms with smiles and delight. They hugged me with enthusiasm, and I could always feel the joy in their bodies as we came together for a visit.

If adoration and delight were rarely or never shown to us when we were children, it can feel hokey or even humiliating when we start showing it to our offspring. Please push through those awkward feelings! If we don’t, they will have to put on the heavy coat of indifference to hide their longings for adoration, which won’t help them find the kind of deeply caring people we hope they will surround themselves with throughout their lives.

Every child will have their own formula for what expressions of adoration and delight fill their cup the most. Some kiddos are sensory sensitive and won’t love a loud and stimulating greeting; they will need you to be more of a cat than a dog in your adoration. Also, teenagers need different forms of adoration than toddlers. They most likely won’t want you to pick them up and spin them around the room.

Here is a list of adoring and delighting actions to try with anyone we love. We can ask before we try, and check in to see how it made them feel after. If our children are not yet verbal, we can pay close attention to what actually lights them up.

- Verbally and facially light up when your child enters the room (a.k.a. the loyal dog). “Hi, my love! It’s so good to see you! I am so glad you are here/back/home!”
- Literally jump with excitement when they tell you something *they* are excited about.
- Offer as many hugs as they can handle. Don’t take it personally if they say no, but keep offering. When you hug, say something like, “Hugging you is one of my favorite things in life!”
- Write little love notes that literally say, “I adore you. Having you in my life is one of the greatest treats I have ever known. Thanks for being my kid. It’s awesome.”
- Play “Guess what I love about you”: Get them to try to guess the things they think you love about them and offer a quarter or a dollar for every one they guess right. Which, of course, will be anything they say that is positive about themselves!
- Anytime you are at their school or witnessing their sports, make sure you stand and cheer with all your heart. (Unless they have specifically asked you not to because it feels embarrassing; in that case, make a mark on a piece of paper for every time you wanted to stand and cheer and give it to them later so they can see how many times you delighted in them).
- Make sure they are your phone background, framed at your office, shown with pride to any adult who will take the time to ogle at them with you.
- Talk positively about them “behind” their back when you know that they can hear you.
- Say “I love you” more than you say any other phrase. I do a thing with my kids where I say, “Do you know how much I love you?” and they say, “*Soooooo* much,” and

then I ask, “How much did you feel my love today? Not at all? A little, a good bit, or all of it?” Then, if they don’t assess the day as a full two thumbs-up, I say, “What can I do to help you feel it all right now? A hug? A kitchen chase? Snuggle up? Read a book together?”

- When they come near, we light up to make sure they know how deeply they are enjoyed.

EMPATHY MATH

I have already spoken quite a bit in this book about the importance of emotional care and attunement. But I am going to really drive it home here:

Children become empathetic toward *others through being given empathy* from *others.*

I meet a ton of well-meaning parents who are very nervous that their children are too selfish. Their toddler steals a toy from another child on the playground and does not seem to care when the other child falls and cries as a result. “Are they a sociopath?” they ask. Their tween doesn’t want to invite her oldest friend to her birthday party because she’s not in the popular crowd. Are they an uncaring friend? Their teenager drives the family car until the gas is nearly empty without thinking to fill it up again. Do they even think about anyone besides themselves?

It can be triggering when our children are so focused on themselves and their developmental tasks and priorities that they forget about what other people feel. It makes sense that we often have a knee-jerk reaction in these moments to shame them or hound them to pay attention to what other people are feeling.

Instead, the most powerful way to get them to learn to have empathy for others is to tune into what is going on for them. Often, we find that there is a more complex layer

happening that they haven't known to share or acknowledge. The toddler was filled with jealousy, a very big emotion for a small, developing body, and didn't know how to respond to the other child. The tween was feeling embarrassed by the way her oldest friend would tease her new friends in crossing-the-line ways. The teen was having a panic attack on their way home, thinking about the biology test they had this week, and didn't even look at the gas gauge.

If we start with, "How do you think that made *them* feel?" our children won't get the impactful experience of our empathy, which is what helps us all want to give it to others. It feels so good when another person takes the time to understand what we are feeling and how it is driving our choices, be they good choices or bad ones.

By offering them care, we make it far easier for them to reflect on the feelings of others without shame, because their feelings are being held as well.

The more empathy we give our children, the more natural it is for them to respond to others with the same tenor.

SIX

Structure Is Nurture's Best Friend

SO, WHAT IS STRUCTURE?

Structure is anything in an environment that provides organization, plans, or life patterns. The structure of a building is what keeps it sound and intact. Structure in our lives and relationships to our children functions similarly. It helps our children to know what goes where, what happens when, and where the walls and boundaries exist. Routines, schedules, and rules are the primary arenas of structure we are responsible for creating in the lives of our children.

All human beings need structure, but it is especially important in helping the developing brain of a child to feel safe, calm, and ready to learn.

Reasonable predictability in our environment allows our brains to anticipate patterns, which helps us to focus on creative and productive experiences instead of survival. If a child has clear structure in their world to help them anticipate routine, expectations, and provisions, they feel safer, which enables them to focus instead on the learning and creative aspects of life.

Structure can be about health (bedtime, handwashing before we eat); about relationships (we take turns on the slide, we say "thank you" when someone gives us something we asked for); about safety (we buckle up in the car, we are home by curfew); or about social responsibility (chores, apologizing when we hurt another person).

Structure helps us and our children to stay better regulated and functional in our tasks and our relationships. Our job is to make sure that we are creating the right amount of structure to

keep us all sane, while also allowing our children to learn new things.

Too Harsh and Rigid

When structure is implemented with a dominance mindset, it can easily become control focused. “You do what I say when I say it, child! You jump when I say jump! You sit when I say sit!”

For instance, if a young teen asks to go to a concert with their friends, and a parent says no, and the teen asks, “Why not?” and the parent says, “Because I am the parent, that’s why,” that parent used dominance as a form of structure. “*I am the parent, so I hold the power, and you are the child, and you are expected to do whatever I tell you with compliance*.”

While this structure makes a parent feel in control of a situation, it also erodes trust in the relationship between them and their child. Not to mention the fact that it gives the teen no opportunity to learn or process the reasoning behind the parent’s decision.

“Because I said so” is relationally harsh, and educationally empty. Unfortunately many people grew up in that form of structure and pass it down to their children without considering the many side effects it brings with it.

Structure can also be too rigid. A parent’s untreated anxiety or unresolved trauma might lead to an entirely too strict set of structures. If a parent is constantly monitoring and controlling a child’s behavior, diet, self-expression, etc., it can overwhelm a child’s nervous system instead of helping them feel contained and safe. Which can really backfire in the long run, both for the child’s ability to set their own boundaries and also for the relationship between a high-control parent and their child.

Too Soft and Permissive

On the opposite side of the spectrum is a permissive response to that question—or a lack of adequate structure. When the young teen asks to go to the concert, and a parent simply says yes without first learning about the situation (Who will be there? How late is the concert? How far is the concert? Who is driving?), there is not enough structure to help the teen learn the important questions they need to be asking before entering into new social settings.

While it might, in that moment, feel nice for the teen to get to do what they want, if that is their overall experience of structure with their parents, they are also feeling lost. If no one is setting up guidelines, that means the child is having to do it themselves. While some exceptional children are able to figure out a wise and secure path without guidelines, most do not, and wish they did not have to.

Children and teens don't always like it when we say no or set up a routine that involves responsibility, but I can tell you that, as adults, they won't be angry that we did. It is far more damaging to our child and our long-term relationship with them to be permissive and leave them to figure it all out on their own.

Just Right

Secure structure is not too harsh or too soft; it is made of the right amount of clarity ("This is how things will work") and compassion ("I understand that it might make you sad or frustrated").

A secure structure in the concert scenario would involve some pre-established boundaries and expectations. The teen would have already known that they could not go to a concert on a school night because of a weeknight curfew (to ensure adequate sleep before school). They might also have known that, until they are sixteen, the household rule requires adult supervision on outings of that nature.

They might ask anyway because they are excited, or they are feeling pressure from friends, and that is okay, but we can remain calm and thoughtful about how we hold that boundary in light of the situation.

We could say, "I can see why you want to go, but I am going to say no because of several factors. 1) It's a school night, and I know you have a huge test in two days, and 2) There are no parents going and you are only fourteen. I will absolutely say yes to this kind of an event when it is on a weekend and a parent is going."

Our teen will likely feel angry, sad, and even panicked ("What if I am dropped by these friends for saying no?"). That's all normal. We can stay firm in our decision and empathetic in our response to our kid.

And we can be flexible when the situation is right. Let's say our child's best friend from out of town has the tickets and won't be back in town for a year, and our child has finished their homework and doesn't have anything big coming up, and there are still tickets available for the show. We could buy ourselves a ticket and promise to sit far enough away to let them have fun "on their own," but not so far away that they are at risk of getting caught up in something dangerous.

When our children can sense that our structures are reasonable, it helps them to trust the structure more and, in turn, trust us more.

Review

CONTROL-BASED STRUCTURE: "Because I said so" or "I am the boss" is a control- and power-focused structure, and it puts us at odds with our children. It lacks the necessary lessons and specificity our children need. It also teaches our children that dominance is what matters in decisions, which can make them

more vulnerable to tolerating abusive and controlling dynamics with other people outside of our home.

PERMISSIVE OR INADEQUATE STRUCTURE: "If you want it, you can have it" lacks the structure necessary to help our children stay safe and healthy during the years they are still learning how to do so. A lack of structure gives our children too much authority over decisions they are not yet mature enough to process. While they might like this at times, it also gives them the sense that we are not mature enough to be the parent.

CONNECTION- AND GROWTH-FOCUSED STRUCTURE: Our kids need consistent, logical, growth-focused structure that flexes and adapts as they develop. Meaning that the rules, routines, and boundaries we set are intended to help them learn and thrive in the world. This kind of structure helps our children to trust us and rely on us for guidance and insight.

In a secure attachment pattern, the parent's goal is to act as a scaffolding outside of our children's developing building. They are not formed enough to stand on their own and need our guidance to help them be healthy, safe, and connected. Our goal is to give them the structure they need to stay intact while they finish getting in their beams and cementing their walls. As they grow, we can slowly remove scaffolding from around them and trust them to take up their own structure.

The key is to look at the *why* behind any structure we create and making sure it is in favor of our child's growth and development.

HOW TO CREATE GROWTH-FOCUSED STRUCTURE

Growth-focused structure is any routine, rule, or boundary that is designed with the specific goal of helping our children to master an important habit, understanding, or skill. These structures are not about maintaining control over our children;

they are about helping to shape our children's understanding and comfort with important positive self-care and community-care rituals.

The beauty of establishing clear growth-focused structure is that it helps our children anticipate expectations, which means they badger us less over limits and rules, and it helps *us* to be calmer when they are pushing boundaries because we are not left to make as many last-minute emotion-based decisions. Sailing a ship with a clear map and destination in mind is *way* less stressful than entering the open seas without a clue of where we are heading.

When we pre-establish structure, we benefit from the mental rest of returning to the established structure (a map, of sorts), instead of making minute-by-minute decisions about things our children are doing or asking for from us. For example: If we have made a rule that food is to be consumed at the table, and our child asks to take a popsicle to the couch, we can refer back to the rule. But if we don't have that pre-established and our child asks, we might struggle to make a decision or change our mind each time based on our mood, which makes it very confusing for them and for us.

Guidelines

Structure needs to be established in response to a child's developmental capacity. What I mean by that is this: a two-year-old needs to have a structure around sharp objects because they are not capable of managing scissors or knives with predictable safety. But a seven-year-old *might* be able to handle those objects responsibly. The seven-year-old still needs structure. For example, what contexts can he use those tools in? (Food, not furniture!) What are the rules for safety? (Only in the kitchen under adult supervision.)

Structure needs to be reasonably solid before it can be flexible. If we are not consistent with structure, it is confusing

to our children. Can we make exceptions to rules and boundaries? Yes! But only on occasions that are concrete and don't disrupt expectations. We see this very clearly in classroom settings. When a teacher is able to establish clear expectations, boundaries, and routines, children are able to get to the task of learning far more effectively. Which then allows for exceptions to the rule out of necessity (a community tragedy) or frivolity (good, plain fun!). For example, kids are expected to wear daytime clothes to school, but occasionally they can have a pj day!

It takes time for children to process and accept new structures. If we set up a new rule or routine, we need to expect pushback, forgetfulness, and even confusion. It is our job to effectively communicate about a new structure and ensure our children are able to understand it and get emotional support around any emotions related to it.

Children need structure to be explained in concrete terms. Children process in less abstract ways than adults, so they need us to make sure we are communicating structure in a way that they can fully grasp. It is too abstract to say, "You need to keep your room clean." Instead, they need to hear concrete tasks such as: "Every day before bed, you need to put all of your dirty clothes in your hamper. Every morning before school, you need to pull your covers neatly up over your bed and smooth them out so your bed is made." As they develop, they will understand the more general abstract direction of "keeping their room clean" because they will be able to mentally assemble all the smaller tasks into that bigger expectation.

Structure does not have to be enforced with punishment. I promise. When our children are not able to follow a rule, guideline, or routine, we do not need to inflict suffering for them to learn it. We can use repetition, playfulness, and

adjustment of the structure to help our children utilize it properly.

SOME RESPECTFUL REFLECTIONS

I care about my children being respectful, to me, to my parents, to their teachers, to any safe and supportive elders in their life. Learning to be respectful toward others is a life skill I know will serve them well along their path.

I do not, however, view respect as complete and total compliance or obedience. Nor do I see respect as something that is only handed upward in a hierarchy. If respect is only handed in one direction I do not believe it is actually respect. I believe it is a control mindset labeled as respect.

The root words for respect come from the French and mean "to regard, to look at, to see." When we respect our children, we gaze into their eyes, we study their rhythms and we notice their emotional worlds, we teach them to do the same. It is in our rituals of respectful relating that our children come to naturally offer those same attentive and attuned ways of relating to others.

> ## PARENTING PERSPECTIVE
>
> ### Mutual Respect as Structure
>
> As an African American community leader and mother of six, life is full…full of blessings and grace, and challenges. Early in my parenting, I realized that the African American "old-school" way of parenting (respect and obey without discussion—respectfully used for survival purposes) was no longer serving this generation in the development of healthy emotional relationships. So I learned to be a more emotionally connected mom to tenderly care for the hearts of my children. I wanted to model and maintain secure

> attachment to help them to feel secure in their own skin and confident to launch into the world.
>
> Many parents in my community have asked how I have raised such compassionate, young leaders with great attitudes. I often share that my children and I practice mutual respect so that when attitude issues arise (on either side) we can talk honestly. I might ask "Did I deserve that?" to spark open conversation. I seek to be sensitive and responsive to their opinions and emotions, we regularly forgive, and I empathize to help them to know they are heard, seen, and valued.
>
> —TE ANNA BROWN, licensed professional counselor, pastor's wife, mother of six

Does that mean we give them the same decision-making influence in their lives when they are toddlers? Nope. That would be neglectful considering their lack of brain development. It means that we treat them with kindness, consideration, understanding, and care. We teach them the way of respect by living it not only with our own elders and the other people around us, but also with our children.

When a parent sees respect through a dominance lens, I believe that generational trauma is influencing their concept of structure. That structure is very rigid and very simple: "I am the boss, you do what I say." Unfortunately, that structure is the exact conditioning that abusive predators look for in children. They know that a child under that structure will have no defense for the request of an adult, and that they will be vulnerable to the grooming process of feeling "special" since they feel so insignificant in their relationships with their caregivers.

We want our children to learn respect through the experience of connection, guidance, boundaries, and reasonable and consistent structure that helps them to flourish

and grow into people who respect others and have a sense of what it feels like to be respected by others as well.

SETTING UP STRUCTURE: ROUTINES, SCHEDULES, AND RULES

Routines

Routines are any regularly necessary habit that we want our children to learn to do consistently. Notice I didn't say "perfectly." It is important that we are creating predictable and consistent routines and not entering into rigidity. There will be mornings when our children forget to brush their teeth, or times when they forget to turn in their homework. Our teens will occasionally sleep in past their alarm and miss the bus. This is not a reason to freak the fluff out. Tis a reason to give grace and understanding and allow the natural consequences to do their thing.

But, if we never clearly communicate and strategize for our life routines, it creates tension and chaos between us and our children. We are far more likely to nag and stress if we are winging it every morning without a clear plan of who does what, goes where, is driven by whom.

Also, every family has different routine needs. So, don't compare yourself to other families if you can help it. Instead, ask yourself the question: What needs to get done every day for our family to be physically, emotionally, and relationally well?

Here, I'm going to use the topic of hygiene as an example of how we set up routine structure in our home and how it changes over time as our children are able to take on more of the decision-making for themselves.

HYGIENE

BY AGE TWO: We wash our hands after we go to the bathroom. We brush our teeth after breakfast and before bed. We keep our fingers out of our noses, genitals, bums, and mouths. We take a bath every night before bed. (My children are filthy by the end of the day. I respect and understand that not every child needs a bath every day, but as toddlers and preschoolers, mine sure as heck do.) In the morning, we put on clothing that is clean (a.k.a. does not have obvious spots or smells).

BY AGE FIVE: They are still doing all of the above, but tend to be less filthy as they age, so they can opt to only take baths or showers when their bodies are covered in dirt or goo, or they are emitting a sour smell or their hair is knotted up and needs some conditioning. Sometimes this is multiple days in a week, sometimes it is once.

BY AGE EIGHT: These routines are so well established, they need very little encouragement or reminders.

BY AGE TEN: Enter the deodorant and encouragement to increase the showering frequency based on body odors.

BY AGE TWELVE: Transfer of responsibility. This is the age at which my children are expected to do their own laundry and make decisions about their hygiene habits. If they are struggling with adequately doing so for some reason, I would check in with them gently to identify what obstacles they are facing that are getting in the way of their hygiene routine. Depression? Stress?

AGE TWELVE TO EIGHTEEN: Our children will sporadically be so focused on something in their world that they neglect to take care of something else. (This is particularly true for our neurospecialized children who have autism or ADHD.) At this adolescent stage of development, we want to act more as consultants for our children to discuss their own structure development.

Do they want to shower at night to sleep longer in the morning?

Is it helpful for them to do laundry every week or every other week, depending on how specific they are about what clothing they want to wear and how often?

Do they want us to set an alarm to help them remember to change their sheets or their toothbrush heads?

As a secure attachment figure in our children's lives, we are teaching them how to take care of their bodies. We want them to understand that their bodies are sacred and valuable and deserve caring and attentive regular maintenance. We also want these things to become *habits* at a very young age.

We don't want to infuse these lessons with anxiety or rigidity (too hot), and we also don't want to hand over responsibility for the habits too early (too cold), as the average four-year-old will not remember to brush their teeth two times a day unless prompted.

Schedule

Just like for adults, knowing what is coming up in the future can be helpful for setting expectations and preparing emotions. This is a skill that, unfortunately, many of us grown-ups are still working to master ourselves! But if we can put in the effort to clarify what is happening in our upcoming weeks, it helps our children to manage expectations, which then reduces the number of shock-related meltdowns or pushbacks.

I have a paper calendar I use for work that I call my "granny planny." I am too tactile to use a computer/internet calendar and need a wider visual view of my week to process it. I then translate that calendar onto a giant three-month calendar that I put up in our kitchen. I have a huge roll of butcher paper I use so that it is big enough for everyone to get a bird's-eye view of what is happening in our family life.

The most important function of this large family calendar is helping my children see what days they have school, what days are weekends, when trips or vacations are occurring, when Mom or Dad is traveling for work or on a friend trip. This gives them the chance to see them written down and the time to process the structure of these events.

As simple as this sounds, it helps our children to anticipate the future, and it helps us to consider the life we are living. As I glance at my schedule and calendar, I am asking myself these regulation- and relationship-focused questions:

- Is our schedule *too full* of events and activities, leading to relational disconnection?
- Is our schedule *too blank,* leading to excess boredom or debates on how to spend time?
- Is our schedule prioritizing important one-on-one time with each of our kids?
- Is our schedule a good balance of the things we have to do and the things we want to do?

I want our calendar to always have enough blank time for spontaneous fun, but enough scheduled time to help us all get what we need.

Rules

When I use the word "rule," I am referring specifically to limits. Behaviors that are *not* allowed in my home are things like hitting, kicking, biting, and name-calling. Though I do not rule with an iron fist, or even try to be "the ruler" with my children, there *are* rules in my home. These are limits that my children need to learn in order to operate safely and lovingly in their social worlds. These rules are not about me controlling them; they are about all of us living together cooperatively and peacefully.

These rules apply to the grown-ups too.

In a relationally secure environment, rules are about creating predictability, guidance, and safety. They are structures that help everyone feel safe and *learn* safe ways of relating and coping. It is important that we do not "allow" our children to get into habits of destruction that they then replicate outside of our home, causing social distress for them with their peers and other relationships in school and the greater community.

Instead, they need our help to develop a tolerance of the limits and expectations of positive social interactions and skills to cope with those limits. When they are young, it is helpful to make the rules visual around the home and add songs and short phrases to help them remember the boundary they are learning to adhere to.

I have a friend who is a lawyer, and she says, "The law is in the favor of the person who wrote it down." And that is absolutely true with children. When we say something auditorily, it doesn't register to them as law, but when we write it down, somehow the rule becomes real. Paper has more authority than hearsay!

ENFORCING STRUCTURE THROUGH CONNECTION

Many of us grew up in homes where all structure was enforced through punishment. You didn't do your homework? You're grounded for a week. You lied to me about whose house you were at this weekend? You lose privileges to the car for the next month.

When we have established a structure and our children have either veered from it momentarily or are struggling to get on board with it in general, it can trigger a feeling of

powerlessness in us, leading us to want to pound down the uprising.

But there are other ways to get our children on board with the structures that we know they need for growth and development.

MODELING: Never underestimate the power of being a good example. If you want your children to put their dishes in the dishwasher after dinner, make sure that you put your dishes in the dishwasher alongside them and without overdoing the "chore" energy of the act.

ADD SOME PLAYFULNESS: Make putting dishes away a kitchen assembly line where you all have a role and you time yourselves each night and record new records.

REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT: Make up a slogan about the dishes and use it over and over and over again until the process of putting away dishes is deeply automatic. For example: "What do the dishes wishes? They wishes to be in the dishwasher swishes."

COLLABORATE: If our children are really digging their heels in, we can offer them a chance to brainstorm a solution. "You really don't seem willing to help put the dishes away after dinner. What do you think we could do to make that job more doable for you, or is there another way you could contribute to the community clean that you think would cause less dread for you?"

BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION: Allowing and Plowing and Empowering

Let's talk about allowing. This is a word that I find gets misused in the greater parenting discussion. Many people use the word "allow" in direct opposition to "punishment." That if a child throws a rock, and a parent does not spank them, or

punish them in some other way, they have "allowed" that behavior.

I'd like to strike this notion from our understanding. Just because we do not respond with harshness to a child's immature behavior *does not* mean that we are condoning or allowing those actions. This misuse of the word "allow" in this line of thinking is linked to a control mentality. It says, "If my child is not in compliance with my wishes, then I must inflict pain to ensure they comply in the future because it is my job to control their behavior."

We aren't flying the plane, remember? We don't have a remote control that operates our child's brain and says, "Allow this maneuver" or "Don't allow that one." Not to mention the fact that, at early developmental stages, and even later hormonal ones, our children can have limited access to impulse control. They need our help to mature through those emotional moments and seasons.

Allowing *is* a problem, but let's be clear on what it actually means to *allow* bad behaviors.

If our child throws a rock in a hurtful way, perhaps at another child's forehead, and we sit back and laugh—"Ha ha ha, boys are just like that"—we have truly *allowed* the behavior and given it a stamp of approval. We often allow behavior in our children that we have never addressed in ourselves. This is an issue. But the solution to this issue isn't smacking our children upside the head.

If we react with immature actions (hitting, spanking, telling, shaming) to our child's immature behavior, we have plowed over them with dominance and damaged trust in our relationship with them. It may be clear that we do not allow them to do what they did, but it is also clear that *we are allowed to act aggressively* and are willing to be a source of pain and even fear in moments when they are struggling.

Plowing, or responding with intense harshness or punishment, can be "effective" in extinguishing a child's behavioral choices. They may now be forevermore terrified of throwing rocks (or if they have a strong-willed personality, they may throw more rocks in a coup d'état for power!), but our response did not give them any nuanced understanding of *why they threw the rock and how to handle that underlying state or need safely in the future.* Nor did it help them develop empathy. It cultivated shame and control dynamics.

The goal of behavior intervention is an *empowering* approach. We want to give our children the support and the tools necessary to learn how to act and cope in ways that empower them and don't shut them down or off.

When a child engages in problematic behavior that is potentially harmful to themselves and others, they need us to follow these guidelines.

NERD ALERT: Discipline Approaches and Outcomes

A secure attachment dynamic with our children comes when we can create enough warmth (nurture) that they feel loved, and enough guidance (structure) that they develop the skills they need to thrive outside of our arms and homes.

The root of the word "discipline" means "to teach," and effective teaching involves both boundaries and connection.

These four parenting approaches use structure and nurture at different volumes and lead to different outcomes for our children.

THE AUTHORITARIAN APPROACH (LOW NURTURE, HIGH STRUCTURE)

The Commanding Officer Parent: When a parent is focused primarily on control and behavior, and does not focus on emotions or connection, the research refers to them as authoritarian. This parent has high demands on their children but low responsiveness to their cues and emotional needs. While these children may know how to “act” and seem in control, in the long term, they are at higher risk for stress, depression, and low self-esteem.

The permissive approach (high nurture, low structure)

The Best-Friend Parent: When a parent is focused primarily on keeping their child “happy” and does not create adequate structure for learning or growth, the research refers to them as permissive. This parent has low demands on their children, as they fear confrontation and conflict. While these children are still likely to have higher self-esteem, they are at higher risk for disorganization, impulsivity, and struggles in completing academic and work tasks.

The neglectful approach (low nurture, low structure)

The “You’re On Your Own, Kid” Parent: When a parent is disengaged both emotionally and tactically, their child gets neither help in feeling confident nor help in learning self-discipline and healthy habits. These kiddos struggle with all of the domains. They have low self-esteem, high stress, high depression rates, and low impulsivity and poor organization and achievement.

The authoritative approach (high structure, high nurture)

> The Securely Attached Parent: When a parent is engaged in both emotional responsiveness and in cultivating developmentally appropriate expectations for their children, the research refers to them as authoritative. These children get the whole kit and caboodle. They feel worthy and loved and therefore have high self-esteem, but they also have the skills necessary to work hard, stay on task, and ultimately meet the demands necessary to mature and launch.

Intervene

We can do this with words or with our bodies. It depends on what developmental stage our children are in. If they are quite young (zero to five), or if they struggle with impulse control (neurodiverse brain type or teens), then stepping in physically can be a necessary part of the process. I was a terrible basketball player in high school (freshman B team, baby!), *but* I did learn how to box out. "Boxing out" is when we get between another player and the net to try to catch the ball. That's what intervention is. It's getting between our child, whoever they are hurting, and whatever "rock" they are throwing. Some examples are:

- "I am not going to let you throw another rock."
- "I am not going to let you continue to pull your brother's hair."
- "I am not going to let you continue to use threatening words in that way."
- "I am going to take a break from this conversation because I am not okay with how you are talking to me right now. I will come back when we are both calmer and ready to engage more gently." (Use with teens/adults.)

Understand

We need to take time to reflect on two important *whys*. The why beneath our child's choices or impulses, and the why beneath our reaction to them. (Remember the Nerd Alert on reflective functioning in Chapter 2.) When we reflect on the dignity and need beneath the problematic behavior, we are cultivating a path forward.

Does my child have an unmet need? Are they triggered in some way? Is there a structure I have not clearly communicated?

Is this activating my own trauma? What am I feeling? Is there anything or anyone here that is influencing or exacerbating how I feel about my child's behavior right now?

Empathetically Express

All of us know what it is like to make a bad choice. Not all of us know what it is like to have someone respond to that choice with understanding and empathy. In case you haven't ever had that experience:

Let. Me. Tell. You. It is transformative. It is powerful to be seen in our dignity when we have acted in a way that does not exemplify it.

"I can see you were trying to be silly and thought throwing the rock at your friend would be fun. It feels sad that I said you have to stop, is that right?"

"I can see you felt upset when your friend took your toy and it was hard to find the words and make a safe choice, is that what you were feeling?"

"I know it can be hard to have a sibling so much younger than you who copies what you do. You feel like they are cramping your unique style when they do what you do, is that how you are feeling?" (Use with tweens.)

"It makes perfect sense to me why you lost your cool when Dad said that thing. Can you share more about how it impacted you?" (Use with teens/adults.)

Empower

Offer alternative skills, tools, and options for the next time they encounter a similar scenario or emotional state.

Toddlers and preschoolers: "When we feel angry in our bodies, that's our sign to ask for help!"

Younger kids: "A safer way to be silly is to pretend to be an animal or use a funny voice."

Tweens/teens: "It is absolutely okay that you are angry, but you need to say, 'I am angry that you did that' and not 'f*ck you,' because when you say that, I don't get to truly understand what you are feeling and it puts me on the defensive."

CULTIVATING A CULTURE OF HONESTY

If we want our kids to be honest with us, we have to cultivate a relational culture that is conducive to being honest. And boy, oh boy, is that a smart thing for a parent to do. Why?

Because if it is safe and even natural for our children to be honest with us, it will also be safe and natural for them to *trust us with the big stuff.* When hard things come up in their social worlds outside of our home, or inside of their minds and bodies, and they need help, they will be far more likely to seek our guidance and support instead of trying to cover it up or figure it out on their own.

Lots of people try to teach their kids to be honest by punishing them for lying. Unfortunately, it backfires. When we take the approach of trying to force honesty, we actually create a sense of mistrust in both directions. Our children feel our suspicion and management of their honesty, which leads them

to feel distrusted by us, and then, when we use punishment to try to control their disclosures, they distrust us as people in their lives more interested in control over them than in connection with them.

Which only motivates them to get better at lying, not more open and honest with us.

Lying can be a big trigger for us. Especially if we have experienced any kind of abuse or mistreatment in the past that involved someone intentionally deceiving us. We can start to associate lying with sociopathic tendencies.

Fortunately for all of us, that is almost never why our children lie.

Lying comes in many shapes and forms. Lies to protect how other people feel ("Your hair looks great!"); lies to protect ourselves from danger ("No, stranger, I can't get in your car, my house is right here and my mom is watching"); lies to avoid consequences ("No, Mom, I swear it wasn't me that dented the car"). Lying is usually not a sign of sociopathy; it is generally more a sign that our minds are working to problem-solve something.

When our children lie, the most effective way to get honesty from them is to compassionately confront the lie:

"Hey, kiddo, I remember when I was a kid, I sometimes told my mom I did things when I hadn't because I really didn't want to have to do them. I can see that your homework isn't done because your backpack never left the car. Can we try again and, this time, let me know the truth about the homework and about how you are not wanting to do it right now? Then we can work through both together."

When we are honest that we know they are lying, and we are also compassionate about the underlying motivations for the lie, our children can see that we are not trying to control

them but instead want to help with whatever it is they were lying about.

Here are some key tips for helping our children gravitate toward honesty with us.

Practice authenticity and honesty. Our children watch us closely, and they take so many of their cues from our choices and behavior. If we are honest in our dealings and in our relationships, they will see the fruit of that wisdom.

Don't be their "trouble." It is so strange that somewhere along the way in the parenting matrix, it became normal for parents to say, "You're in trouble now," in reference to ourselves as the source bringing our children the trouble. We don't want to be our children's trouble; we want to be the place where they are guided, supported, and given opportunities to learn.

Don't overreact or underreact to lying. Address lying calmly when you catch it and help them notice the relief that comes when a lie is revealed. They feel understood and more supported, not punished and shamed.

Show pride and gratitude when they are courageously honest. When a kid comes clean about something or lets you in on something big in their heart or life, make sure you express gratitude and pride. "I'm so proud of you for sharing that, I know that took guts" or "Thank you so much for trusting me with that, I feel truly honored to be someone you can trust with the tricky stuff."

Of all the structures that we create in our home, cultivating a structure for authentic sharing may be the most important. We want our children to know that honesty and struggle are met with compassion and support. That no matter what pickle our children are in, we will show up for them and help them make things right.

Yes, there is a curfew. Yes, we expect them to work on their homework before screen time. Yes, they have chores to finish to earn their allowance. But also, yes, we will help them get back on track when they've fallen off. Yes, we will understand why they chose to keep a bad choice hidden from us for a while. Yes, we will help them identify what support they can utilize to not make that bad choice again. We are on their team, and whatever structures we create in our home are about helping them be safe, healthy, and on their way to more independence and maturity.

SEVEN

Secure Conflict

Conflict. Ugh.

Nothing is worse than the tension and uncertainty of being at odds with another person, or watching someone else we love be at odds with other people we care about. *Especially* when that someone we love also happens to be our child.

So here are the four steps to living a conflict-free life with your children:

You can't.

You really can't.

I'm so sorry, but you can't.

We might be having conflict now. That's okay. We'll figure this out.

In my childhood home, conflict went from zero to sixty faster than a Ferrari. A minor disagreement would quickly turn into a threat of divorce or a broken door handle. And the aftermath often felt even worse. A parent in bed for days, or a relationship estranged into silence. The only thing that conflict produced in my home was escalation and tense uncertainty.

Not unsurprisingly, it took me many years of healing work to feel calm and confident in moments of conflict. I had to heal in order to believe that conflict can be productive and even bring people *closer* together in the end. I had to retrain my brain to believe that not all conflict was going to end in catastrophe. I am sharing this with you all because I want you to know that this is possible. I am no longer afraid of conflict. I still feel vulnerable when it comes up, but I also feel secure

in myself and in the hope that it can lead to incredible growth in our relationships.

It is not to say that my trauma doesn't knock on my door every once in a while. Every so often, I will encounter a conflict that activates my former catastrophe response: *"I have to fix this."* Luckily I now know when that message comes up, it is a message from my childhood, not from the present. My past conflict experiences are now more like a whisper in my bones than a ringing between my ears.

When they come up, I can remind myself that conflict is an opportunity for discovery. That conflict is arising to teach me things about what I need, what others need, and what our relationship needs. I can calm the panicky voice as I open my heart and work with my people to find our way back to each other again.

Secure conflict is the emotionally charged dance of discovery we do when our complicated needs and preferences come into contact with someone else's complicated needs and preferences.

With other adults, secure conflict can only happen when both parties are willing to take on a discovery mindset.

But our children are not developmentally capable of that kind of reciprocity with us in conflict.

When we are in conflict with other adults, it is appropriate to ask them to take half of the responsibility for repairing a conflict, whereas when we are in conflict with our children, we need to hold responsibility for our own part, *and* for helping them learn a cooperative approach at the same time!

Which is why I have a separate definition for secure parent-child conflict.

Secure Parent-Child Conflict: An emotionally charged dance between the complicated needs, feelings, and

preferences of a person (adult caregiver) and a child that the parent is responsible for guiding, teaching, and modeling cooperative conflict skills to/with.

Conflict with our children asks much *more* of us than conflict with other adults because the responsibility for the relationship cannot be split evenly.

They do not have the brain development or life experience to mutually hold an understanding of our needs and perspectives. With our kids, we are literally the bigger person, and it is our responsibility to honor that even when the conflict is initiated by our child's choices or dysregulation.

Take that in. Some days, I can take it in fully; other days, I want to tantrum right alongside my children and stomp my feet and yell, "This isn't fair!"

Yet! Alas! When we take on a discovery mindset in conflict with our children, they *instinctively learn the rhythms of secure conflict resolution.* Our openness to their needs during conflict will help them learn to be open to other's needs during conflict. By modeling a rupture to repair conflict process, we empower our children to trust in the process of learning that conflict offers us all.

A secure conflict process with our children happens when we steer clear of the pits of despair, dominance, avoidance, or peacekeeping long enough to get to the juicy center of what our children need us to see, understand, respond to, or receive.

In a secure attachment, conflict is seen as an opportunity to grow closer and more deeply connected. There are safety rails involved, but there is also an acceptance of conflict as a part of any healthy relationship.

REFLECTING ON OUR CONFLICT HISTORIES

One of the most important things we can do to help cultivate a mature conflict dynamic with our children is to understand *our*

own conflict history and how it informs the ways we feel and act when we are in a state of conflict.

We all have ingrained beliefs and patterns from dynamics in our childhood that we continue in other close relationships we forge along the way. If we were lucky enough to have models of cooperative and regulated conflict responses from people, well, that's just hunky-dory! But the majority of us need to put in some reflective work to heal past hurts so that they are not bubbling over into our relationships with our kids.

What mindsets did you acquire about conflict along the way?

A secure-discovery mindset says, "This conflict is an opportunity to learn and grow."

An insecure-dominance mindset says, *"I must win!"*

An insecure-peacekeeping mindset says, *"I must fix this!"*

An insecure-doomsday mindset says, *"Everything is broken now!"*

An insecure-avoidant mindset says, *"I hope this goes away!"*

If any of your answers were winning, fixing, doomsdaying, or avoiding, then that's a good sign that you need to do a little bit more work on your past conflict experiences so that they don't cloud up your present capacity for cultivating a secure conflict model with your children.

The insecure conflict mindsets in the list above make us *more tense and more disconnected* during conflict, as they don't point to a path forward and through. They point toward greater dysregulation. The less regulated *we are*, the harder it is to make a repair. The longer it takes to get to repair, the more likely we and our children are to get caught in painful insecure conflict loops.

If Conflict in Your Childhood Was Trauma-flict

If you grew up in a home where conflict led to knock-down, drag-out fights or flinging objects and threatening words, you were not experiencing just conflict, you were also experiencing *abuse in response to conflict.* I like to call that "trauma-flict."

It is important to acknowledge this because it helps us to separate the past from the present. If we can recognize that our experiences with conflict were infused with trauma, we can begin to peel away the unsafe intensity of our childhood trauma from the still intense but safe conflicts we encounter in parenthood.

In childhood, we held no influence or resources and were truly powerless to alter the dynamics in our home. But in adulthood, we are the parents! How we respond to our children in moments of conflict has massive implications on the dynamics with our children. We are no longer powerless; we are, in fact, the person in the dynamic with the most power and influence.

As our children navigate stages of life that are highly emotional or hormonal, they may struggle to control impulses and use hurtful hands or words with us. This is not the same thing as an abusive adult intentionally harming others when they don't get their way, but if we have not resolved our past experiences around our childhood, it can certainly cause those feelings in us, making us feel that we are back in a childhood state without any resources or influence.

We may be bigger/older/more developed than our children for most of their childhood, but that does not mean that we always *feel* that way. If we grew up in a deeply militant home where we were scared into submission via angry threats, now, when our five-year-old is screaming that they hate us and are going to run away if we won't let them stay up past bedtime,

our past trauma hops right into the room and leads us to feel as small, scared, and unsafe as we did when we were the child.

Once we are in a trauma state, we are going to struggle to stay calm and regulation focused with our child and revert instead into more reactive or passive/shutdown states.

If you resonate with the idea of trauma-flict, I want you to:

Make sure you have safe and caring people in your life to help you process the abuse and chaos that ensued in your childhood when conflict arose. The more you can process that pain, the more you will be able to recognize it when it comes into the room.

Work to remind yourself that you are no longer the child and that you have influence and resources you did not have when you were small. Once we take care of our younger child-self, it is far easier to stay stable and grounded when our children are having their big reactions. We can be the safe and steady adult to them that we needed to have in our own childhood.

If Conflict in Your Childhood Was Off-Limits

On the other hand, if you grew up in a family with parents who were terrified of conflict (maybe *they* grew up in a volatile home) and you adapted to your parent's conflict anxiety by becoming entirely agreeable, you may feel lost at sea when your children passionately disagree with you.

I've known many people who grew up in homes where their parents avoided conflict, and it wasn't peaceful, it was *Pleasantville.* The relational environment was robotic and not genuinely connected. And the conflict that wasn't being addressed in their homes *still existed,* it just wasn't expressed outwardly, which meant it had to implode inside of everyone. Not a secure situation.

> **PARENTING PERSPECTIVE**

> **Respect Within Culture**
>
> Respect is a core value for many Indigenous families. In many ways this value is instilled with self-empowerment; each nation is different. Respect is part of the basis for healing and forging ahead with endeavors. It encourages self-confidence and thereby the ability to intellectually grow. The benefits of both exhibiting and having respect is also considered a reflection of one's family. For all these reasons, this value is innately taught from early childhood. It is displayed within the family and community without question. Sadly, it is a way of self-preservation as well because Indigenous people are minorities, and they face systemic and social racism. The value allows for resilience and human growth in our own right. All of this is why respect is very important in many Indigenous families. And for all these reasons, I continue to carry on this value in my family and I can see that it is being passed on to my grandchildren already. I feel that this is one reason Indigenous families can carry on cultural traditions in the mix of an always changing world.
>
> —SALISHA OLD BULL, artist, mother of five

A no-conflict home is *internally* tense, even if it looks calm on the outside. If conflict is not allowed, then neither is the emotional safety necessary to share one's authentic self.

Learning how to securely resolve conflict is something that takes practice. If you grew up in a home where conflict was off-limits, you never got a chance to get the number of repetitions that it takes to trust the process. Instead, your nervous system goes into panic and avoidance mode as soon as tension enters the room. You have lots of practice at burying, ignoring, and fleeing, but not enough practice

tolerating the tension and getting through to the reconnecting and repairing part.

If you resonate with a no-conflict home, I want you to:

Work on staying in conflict for longer. When you are upset at someone or someone you care about is upset at you, I want you to plant your feet on the floor and stay in the room longer (both literally and emotionally).

I want you to remind yourself that you can handle this and that whatever needs are underlying the conflict can get understood and met. Over time, you will find that you feel less afraid of the feelings involved in conflict and that doing so leads to much richer connections with your children and anyone else you love.

THE DISCOVERY ZONE

One of the most common conflicts in the Harwood household is what the Berenstain Bears accurately refer to as "the Bedtime Battle." The conflict that occurs at the time of night that my husband and I would like our children to enter a peaceful horizontal state of unconsciousness so that we can do fun things like clean the kitchen, return emails, and get to bed ourselves. But our children see this time in an entirely different light.

While I would really love for bedtime to be a predictably scheduled event where I wave my magic wand and lull all my children easily into slumber, it is usually a complex cacophony of emotional and practical needs. Hence the conflict.

While I may think that my sensory-seeking daughter should lie still and breathe deeply and relax into sleep, *she* thinks that she should hang like a monkey on the side of her bed buck naked and sing a ballad about narwhals.

While I may think that my elementary school son should wind down in his bed as soon as possible in order to prevent

the inevitable moaning and pain that comes with being awake for a 7:01 bus pickup. *He* thinks he needs to finish "one last" part of his Lego creation that clearly involves at least twelve more "last parts."

While I may think my highly sensitive daughter should feel safe in her room with her music box, fairy lights, unicorn pillow, and seventeen stuffies, *she* thinks that maybe crawling back up into my uterus for the next three years would be a safer situation.

During these conflicts, I often feel tempted to move into insecure conflict mentalities. I am tired and they are tired and all the needs are swirling at once and I just want to be "done" for the day. These conflicts are when I feel the most intense pull to yell or threaten or stomp out of their rooms with a martyr-like huff.

While I do occasionally succumb to those insecure responses, what works best for all of us is when I instead embrace the discovery mindset. It helps me to take a pause and move toward repair instead of battling for control.

I start by reminding myself that I cannot fly anyone else's planes, but I *can* fly my own. What do I need to stay calm and loving even though things aren't going the way I want them to?

Then, after I am calmer, I ask myself, "What are the unmet needs here?" What does each individual child need to feel soothed and calm and ready for sleep?

What other things are happening in our lives that might be making rest a challenge tonight? (Was I working longer today? Is tomorrow a holiday or an exciting event? Did we just start school or get off a school break?)

Then I identify what I can do in the moment, and in the future. Do I need to take a pause and reassess my

expectations? Do I need to reiterate a structure that I have not set up clearly or consistently?

Two nights ago, when one of my little ones was struggling to fall asleep, she kept asking me if she could sleep in my bed, saying it was more comfortable. Instead of arguing with her (they are the same mattresses and types of sheets!), I thought a little deeper. When was the last time that I had any special alone time with this daughter of mine? We've spent a ton of time together, but not a ton of concentrated one-on-one time. I looked her in the eyes and asked, "What feels more comfortable about my bed?" She said, "You're there."

She was needing some closeness with me, and bedtime is a time of separation. She's three, so her best attempt at getting that time with me was to boycott sleep. I had her sleep in my bed that night, and my husband (god bless his long-legged self) slept in her bed. I made sure to be clear that she would sleep in her bed the next night but that tonight we would soak up all the closeness we could until her heart was full in the morning. We snuggled and hugged, and I let her know how much I love being close to her. The next night? She went to bed waaaaaay easier. Her need had been met.

Moving into a discovery mindset does not automatically result in my children doing what I want them to do, but it keeps me in control of being the kind of parent that I want to be. It helps me see myself and my children with *understanding,* and it helps me get clear on what might not be working and what I can do to help get it there.

ROLE-ING WITH THE PUNCHES

The next important thing we need to get clear on is understanding the role of a secure parent in a parent-child conflict. This can be a bit confusing because many of us grew up in homes where the roles were inverted. It was viewed as the child's job to make amends to the parent, and the child's

job to listen to the parent's perspective, and the child's job to keep the relationship "peaceful" through compliance. The parent's role was to be right and in charge, and the child's role was to submit and learn.

If you grew up in a home that was structured that way in conflict, I am guessing that you have had quite a road trying to figure out what healthy and reciprocal relationships look like. Instead of feeling confident and secure in conflict, you likely get stuck in a vicious shame-and-blame cycle.

When full responsibility for repair is placed upon a child, they never get to experience true discovery and repair in conflict. They either learn to please people or to enter battle mode.

So, what *is* our role supposed to be in conflictual situations with our children?

A secure parent is a conflict guide.

We are the more mature, older, more responsible party (hopefully).

Our children are our conflict pupils.

Which means that they don't yet know how to handle conflict in mature ways and they need us to *compassionately model the repair process with them.*

Even when they are literally or metaphorically punching in our direction. When they are utilizing coping patterns that are destructive, things like hitting, kicking, screaming, calling names, making threats, etc. It is our role and responsibility to stay calm, help them regulate, and then labor to understand what they are communicating to us.

Whatever it is that we hope *they will learn* to do when they are in conflict with others, we need to be modeling in our responses to them.

The Secure Parent Conflict Code of Conduct

I wrote up a code of conduct to help *us parents* handle conflict in secure ways so that our children can learn from what we do and not just what we say we want them to do.

It is my job to initiate repair with my child. Always. I go first because it models that there is no shame in reconciliation and reconnection during or after conflict.

When I apologize first and take accountability for my part first, I am giving my child a dignified opportunity to learn to do the same.

It is my job to calm my body when I am triggered. It is not our children's job to keep us calm; it is our job to recognize when we are getting activated and model taking the steps to get into a more regulated brain and body state.

It is my job to refrain from shame and blame. Our children are doing the best they can at any given moment of their life. When we use shame and blame in response to them, we are using tools of control and dominance, which is teaching them to do the same. The truth is always kind and empowering.

It is my job to model safe and nonviolent communication. When we say, "I am feeling upset," instead of, "You are making me mad, and I am about to lose it on you," we show our children that we are all responsible for our own emotional states. When we say, "I need to take a break to calm myself," instead of, "If you don't stop, I am going to whoop you one in the head," we are teaching our children that the first step in cooperative conflict is self-control.

It is my job to reassure my child that we will get through the conflict.

When you are new to conflict, it can be disorienting. Kids need to hear us say, "We're in a tiff about this now, but soon

we will be back in connection. This is just something we are figuring out."

It is my job to assess and meet the underlying needs that led to the conflict.

Were either of us overtired or over-hungry or overstimulated? Had I managed expectations thoroughly enough? Is there a structure we need to implement that we have not yet? Is something going on with me or them that is not being given the proper care and attention it needs?

COOPERATIVE CONFLICT SKILLS

Now that we have a discovery mindset, and we understand that our role is to be a secure conflict guide for our children, we next need to know what we are teaching them! What are cooperative conflict skills?

- Active listening
- Calm communicating
- Respectful responding
- Receiving repair

These are the four things we need to be doing with our children when we are in conflict with them or anyone else in our lives. The more we enact these skills during conflict, the easier it will be for our children to learn them. The goal is that they have mastered these skills by the time they are in their late teens. This is a long-term parenting project.

Why? Because cooperative conflict skills require a mature and developed brain, and they take a ton of practice to master.

When we first teach our children to ride a bike, we understand that it will take them time to get the hang of it. We start them off with scaffolding in the forms of training wheels or strider bikes, and then when they have gotten comfortable

within those parameters, we help them learn to ride with the training wheels off and the pedals on.

When they first attempt to ride a big-kid bike, we walk and run beside them to help buffer a potential fall. It can feel scary and awkward while they are learning, but eventually they get the hang of it.

Cooperative conflict skills are learned in the same way as bike-riding skills: time and practice! The next time your child does something problematic in conflict, you can tell yourself, "Everyone falls off their bike when they are learning to ride, this is just like that. Their foot slipped off the pedal of calm communication, or they forgot to keep their hands on the handles of active listening. What part of riding the bike of conflict are they needing help with?"

In order to stay calm and secure as our children's secure conflict guide, it is important to understand that it takes time for our children to learn cooperative conflict skills and have a brain capacity for executing them in high-intensity conflict.

Calm Bodies Before Constructive Conversations

One *very* important thing to understand about effective cooperative conflict and repair is the order of operations.

1. Co-regulating and connecting
2. Constructive conversations

If we try to reverse that order, we end up prolonging the repair. Why?

Because we have a top-down brain organization. What that means is that the higher levels of our brain (a.k.a. the executive functioning prefrontal cortex) are only able to function when the lower levels of our brain are regulated. If our limbic system, our survival reactionary brain, is highly

active (a.k.a. we are deeply upset or feeling threatened), it is very hard to reflect, think, or problem solve.

NERD ALERT: Brain Development and Conflict Responses

Conflict is hard for all of us, but it is especially hard for children during specific developmental stages, particularly due to the brain growth that occurs in toddlerhood and adolescence.

The toddler brain is on fire. It is forming profound amounts of new neural connections and working to master language acquisition and countless new motor skills.

A two-year-old might be able to say, “We do not hit,” when they are calm and being coached but does not have the neurological capacity to control the impulse to hit when they are emotionally flooded. While they may “know” not to hit, when we tell them it is time to leave the playground, they are flooded with neurochemicals and cannot think or find words to express their frustrated feelings and so instinctively react by whacking us across the head.

We may need to create space so they can’t injure us, but we need to stay calm and recognize the problem isn’t they think hitting is okay; the problem is their brain is flooded with big emotion they are not yet developed enough to process in a verbal way.

The teenage brain is also on fire. Teenagers are going through incredible physical change as a result of increased hormones, as well as a process

in the brain called “myelination,” where the brain is speeding up communication between neurons.

These massive physical changes amount to huge swings in our teenagers’ moods and mental states. They may have mastered some of the cooperative conflict skills in late elementary school and now seem to have regressed. The truth is they are facing a new frontier of brain development causing a need to relearn these skills in the face of larger swells of emotion.

They need us to remember what those huge rushes of emotion were like for us back then, do our best not to take it personally, and remain available to them when they come down off a mood surge.

Psychiatrist Dr. Dan Siegel and psychotherapist Dr. Tina Payne Bryson refer to these two different brain functions as the upstairs brain and the downstairs brain. The upstairs brain helps us think and process, while the downstairs brain helps protect us from threats. Grown-ups have both brains too, which is why we often say things we don’t mean in moments of tension and fear.

Add in the fact that children have underdeveloped brains, and it makes sense that they often struggle to think clearly when they are full of the feels. This is why we want to focus on helping our children (and ourselves!) calm our bodies and co-regulate together *before* initiating any rational learning.

Ideas for co-regulating with our children:

- Acknowledge with them that we are having a tense moment. “This is hard right now.”
- Do square breathing to help bring our upstairs brain back online. “I need to take some deep breaths to help my body

relax a bit so we can reconnect."

- Get down on their level physically to show our intent for connection. "I am here, buddy, we will figure this out."
- Soften our voice so they can sense we are calming and intend no harm. "I'm listening, I want to hear you."
- Focus our attention on our child's pain and offer them empathy. "I can see you are feeling really upset about this, and that makes sense."
- When they are calm enough, offer to melt together. "I would love to hug/hold you if you want to?"
- Reassure them that repair is coming. "It's going to be okay, we are a great team together, even when things are hard."
- Sit quietly with a loving presence but stay silent. Sometimes saying nothing is what our children need to calm their bodies and minds.

The process of co-regulating our bodies into a calm and connected state is like walking hand in hand back up into our upstairs brains together. If we try to problem solve before we reconnect, it is *so much* harder to hear each other because we end up back in the basement of defensiveness. Many misunderstandings and escalations get stuck because we flip this order and try to *talk our way into calmness, instead of calming our way into talkativeness.*

ACCOUNTABILITY IS LEARNING, NOT BLAME

After we have co-regulated with our children and they can tell that we have heard and understood their frustration, or sorrow, or shame or fear, or whatever other tricky feeling they were navigating, *then* we can enter into a conversation about steps for solving the conflict.

This is a necessary part of conflict resolution and important for our children to learn the action steps they can take in order to actually repair a situation.

The goal of accountability is not to shame our children or ourselves but rather to take stock of what occurred.

Lots of us are taught that accountability means saying, "I am the problem," but that type of shame accounting usually doesn't lead to greater growth and connection; it leads to feeling crappy about ourselves. Instead, we want to teach our children how to consider the ways that their actions affect others and to truly take in the pain of others as a teacher for doing better in the future.

Secure accountability is an accounting process, but with less math and more feelings.

A few weeks ago I was with my daughters at the park, enjoying the magic of a warm fall day. It was one of those blissful parenting moments where my children were playing peacefully with each other and I was sitting quietly absorbing some vitamin D while no one at all was touching me or calling my name.

Usually my girls burn out on a playground after about an hour and are willing to go home or switch venues due to boredom or hunger. Around dinnertime, I let them both know that I had set a five-minute timer and that, when the timer went off, we would pack up and head to the car. The timer went off, but only one of my daughters came to my side, ready to depart.

I gave a verbal reminder to the other daughter. She pretended not to hear me. So I went closer to the place where she was running on the playground and let her know that if she did not start walking toward the car with us that I was going to have to pick her up and take her there. An idea she *really* did not like.

So she booked it in the opposite direction at full force. I ran, too, as she was heading toward a street with cars, but instead of catching up to her, I *fell* forward in full force. Kaboom. She heard me fall and turned to see what happened. I was already annoyed that I was having to chase her, but I felt truly angry when that chase turned into a physical injury to my body. I dropped a colorful word or two and then dusted myself off and stood up.

She started toward me and was worried about my fall. She looked at me and said, "Mama, are you okay?"

I said, "My knee hurts and I was scared when you ran away, but I am going to be okay."

Her face fell in shame, so I reached down and offered to scoop her up. "Let's go get cozy in the car, okay?" She wrapped her arms around my neck, and we melted together as we gathered up our things and got into the car.

At that point, the bruised part of me still partially wanted to blame my three-year-old for my frustration and my injury, but I held myself to the Secure Parent Conflict Code of Conduct. No shame or blame. Instead, I said, "Let's talk about what just happened there."

We took account of all of it. The fun, the sun, the leaving fiasco. My daughter's feelings of sadness about leaving and the resulting fleeing from me. My feelings of frustration and fear of her running toward a street and the resulting falling. Then we all thought about what we could do differently next time. My daughter decided she could have said, "I am sad to leave," and asked for a hug. I decided that I could have been more playful about leaving and helped the fun travel from the park to the car.

She and I were held safely in secure accountability as we processed exactly what happened with a discovery mindset. It was not hard to take accountability for our parts in the conflict

because taking accountability did not mean taking on the role of the bad guy. It meant learning together.

CHILD-ON-CHILD CONFLICT

I didn't play a ton of video games as a child, but I played enough *Super Mario Bros.* to know that it is one thing to have to jump over one killer goombah, and another thing entirely to have to jump over a goombah while twelve fireballs are shooting at your head.

Navigating conflict between us and our children is far less complex than navigating conflict that occurs between our children and their siblings or their peers.

What is a secure way to respond when they are having conflict with their siblings or some random child or teen outside of our family?

Let's start by remembering our long-term goal is to help our children learn to use a discovery mindset while utilizing cooperative conflict skills. We want them to learn how to recognize and communicate their needs, feel empathy toward the pain and needs of others, and have the capacity to take accountability for the way their actions negatively affect others without getting stuck in the bogs of shame and blame.

We have to be prepared for several different roles. We are still the guide, but sometimes our role as guide has us as the referee, the investigative journalist, or the repair shop owner—and hopefully, eventually, the consultant.

The WWE Referee

When our children are developing, they are not yet capable of fully regulating their nervous systems, right? So, when they feel angry or scared or ashamed, they often impulsively react instead of calmly processing.

While this is something we can understand and have compassion for, it is still our responsibility to intervene when our children are engaging in physical and hurtful reactions to conflict. This is where we need to don the black-and-white stripes of the WWE referee (formerly known to me as the WWF a.k.a. the World Wrestling Federation).

We need to pay close attention to the fight. If our children are not young enough to control their physical impulses, they need to be surveilled frequently in general, but constantly in conflict.

We are responsible for ensuring that no illegal moves are being performed, and if they are, we need to step into the ring.

It doesn't matter if it is our kid hitting another kid, or our children biting each other, we need to clearly establish nonviolence with our littles. If someone is using physical harm to communicate (or dominate), we need to step in and establish a clear boundary. We blow the whistle and pause the round. We do this calmly and without any violence ourselves. The goal here is to help our children learn the limits of conflict interaction. We do not hit, kick, bite, claw, slap, spit, poke, etc. The first rule of fight club is that we do not physically fight each other.

The Investigative Reporter

The second role we often need to play in conflict is one of information gathering. While our children are in the throes of big emotional responses to conflict, they and we often don't have the whole story. They need our help to "get to the bottom" of what happened between them and their brother or sister or friend.

A true investigative reporter is not looking to slant a story. They are looking for facts and only facts. We are not trying to investigate who was at fault, or who was innocent, but rather

what led to what led to what. Our job is to do this while holding on to the truth that children are doing the best they can with what they have.

We are figuring out the facts to help our children give and receive empathy and understanding to each other so that we can move on toward helping them repair and try again.

Some facts might be:

Robert was playing on the scooter, and Carlos wanted a turn. Carlos asked for a turn, but Robert sped off. Carlos felt angry and threw his shoe at him. The shoe hit Robert in the back of the head, throwing him off the scooter. Carlos snagged the scooter and started to peddle, but Robert grabbed Carlos's leg and pulled him to the ground. Carlos and Robert then commenced a WWE-like wrestling match.

As the investigative reporter, we want to give airtime to everyone's story and perspective and be clear that everyone's painful feelings matter. What happened is the key to understanding what needs to happen for things to be made right.

The Repair Shop

Making repairs can be tricky. Especially if you are seven and haven't spent decades repairing conflicts or collecting the tools necessary to do so. In this role, we are helping our children to learn the processes involved in repairing various types of relationship damage.

I want to be clear, though, that we don't do the work for them—we teach *them* how to do the repair work. As airplane mechanics, we have the tools and the knowledge to help our children learn how to do their own repair work. They need to visit us in our shop to learn how to use a particular skill to help get their airplane back online in a particular relationship.

So, once we have blown the whistle on Robert and Carlos, we take off our black-and-white stripes and pull on our coveralls, and we bring them into the repair shop. We help them survey the damage, and then we help them find the tools they need to make the repair.

Robert will need to understand what it felt like when he ignored Carlos and sped off.

Carlos will need to understand how painful it was when his shoe shot landed on Robert's head.

Robert and Carlos will both need to understand how awful it felt to be pummeled and wrestled by someone they consider to be a friend. Then they will need to identify how to communicate care, regret, and commitment to do better next time.

The Consultant

The hope is that each of these roles we play for our children will eventually become *their* roles. After time to develop their brains and practice cooperative conflict over the years, they will have learned how to 1) Referee themselves from reactive behavior, 2) Compassionately investigate needs/perspectives, and 3) Effectively utilize repair tools to get their relationships back in working order.

Once that has happened, we can step into a consultant role. The consultant only comes onto the scene when invited.

If our children are in the midst of a conflict and they ask us to consult, we ask them, "What part of this do you want help with?" They might want ideas on what to say, validation, or for you to just listen.

Despair says, "There is nothing anyone can do," while repair says, "Let's find our way back to each other."

How do we get back to each other?

In this role, we are not telling our children what to do or how to do it but rather helping them fine-tune what they already know and trust their skills and instincts.

RUPTURE TO REPAIR

Our children need us to lead repair, but that does not equate to being perfectly in sync twenty-four seven.

Contrary to social media and online mommy wars, secure parenting is about meeting needs most of the time, not winning awards every minute of the day. Perfect parenting is a burden to children, not a gift. A legacy of perfectionism means we carry the world on our shoulders, and therefore teach our children to do the same.

Instead, we want to show our children that it is okay to mess up. That we do our best to get back on track when we've fallen off. We, as their parents, will work to repair after ruptures occur and to return to connection after we've drifted a little bit apart.

Rather than feeling like conflict is a not-so-merry-go-round of the same old fights, the rupture-to-repair process should produce a sense of growth in our relationships—each time learning something new, hearing something deeper, and strengthening the security in our relationship.

EIGHT

Connection as Protection

When we create a secure connection with our children, it helps them to trust our capacity to help them through the hard stuff. They are then able to use us as a resource to help them navigate abuse and pain. They also accumulate messages from us that they internalize in their hearts and minds that help them to identify maltreatment in their relationships outside our home.

A secure attachment relationship functions as our strongest form of protection.

I'll share how to use connection as protection, but first I want to deconstruct some of the protection-focused parenting pitfalls that can get in the way of cultivating the connection our children need in order to be able to fully rely on us.

SAFETY FIRST

One late-summer evening, I was out in my yard playing with my two-year-old twins. They were taking turns going down a slide in our backyard, and I was fully relaxed and enjoying the afternoon sunshine and my toddler's cute antics when I got a bit thirsty and stood up to get some water. Before I even knew what I was doing or seeing, I immediately mobilized toward my twins, grabbed them both, and headed away from the middle of the yard.

Coiled up in the sun only three feet away from us was not one but two rattlesnakes! Lucky for us, these two dangerous reptiles were mating and were therefore not interested in anything other than procreation.

My reaction to the snakes was swift and came from this deep-seated human instinct to react to danger. I truly did not consciously process why I had reacted that way until after I already had my gals secured under my arms and en route to safety.

I am sharing this story because I want to drive home the point that if/when we encounter true life-threatening danger, we will not be *making decisions* as much as *riding reactions.* The "keeping our children safe from immediate danger" part of our role in the protection of our children usually doesn't require much training; it's laced into our DNA as a result of lessons our ancestors had to learn the hard way. Keeping children away from snakes, lightning storms, cliffs, wild hogs, and spooky strangers is preprogrammed.

If we encounter any of these dangerous scenarios, our sympathetic nervous system (flight, flight, freeze) will activate us into the most effective survival response possible at that moment.

Why is this important to know? Because it is very easy as a parent to slip into a highly anxious state where we are constantly thinking about the ways our children could be harmed or lost and letting those intrusive thoughts run amok in our brains as a false sense of protection.

This unfortunately does not actually prepare us for the scary moments, and works against our goal of giving our children what they need as it robs us of being calm enough to offer them a safe haven to regulate in and a secure base to launch from.

We do not have control over whether snakes wander their way into our gardens. We don't even have control over what our sympathetic nervous system will do when that happens. (I am so glad mine chose flight and not faint on that particular day!)

We can, though, put in work to cultivate a relationship with our children that leads to them wanting to come to us when life feels scary or overwhelming.

A child with a secure parent has internal scripts that sound like:

"If I am scared, my parent is a safe place to turn to."

"My emotional cues can be trusted."

"I will feel soothed and supported when I do turn to my parent in distress."

These internalized beliefs are the difference between our children telling us that someone is bullying them or abusing them or, instead, choosing to bury their pain and look for ways to numb and dissociate from it.

Pitfall #1: Mistaking Control for Protection

As we process all the bajillion ways our littles could face harm, we can easily slide from having a protective mindset to having a controlling mindset and approach. *It is truly vulnerable to be attached to our children.* As parents, we have the life experience to know how dangerous and scary the world can be, not to mention the ongoing news coverage detailing all current global disasters and a social media buffet of disturbing stories about bad things happening to children.

Parenthood comes with ten thousand truckloads of scary items to sort through. If we let ourselves, we can easily get consumed by all of these potential threats and struggle to believe that the world can ever be a safe place for our children, leading us to clamp down in ways that make it hard for our children to explore the world with confidence.

While it is our job to do what we can to protect our children from imminent harm (*yes, put them in life jackets if they can't swim!*), there is a huge difference between *offering*

our children reasonable protection and *saddling them with the load of our adult anxiety.*

How do we know we have launched into control mode?

We panic every time our child encounters pain or the risk of pain.

We anxiously lecture on what could go wrong *significantly more* than we offer confidence in our child's ability to make safe decisions.

We direct anger toward our children when they do something that scares us.

We use restriction and punishment as our primary teaching tools.

If we allow fear to consume our parenting responses, we start creating a dilemma for our children. They can sense our overwhelm and feel our fear, so we no longer appear to be a resource for security and soothing for *their* fears. Instead, our anxiety or our controlling responses to our anxiety become a repellent between them and us. They fear getting in trouble with us when they are scared. Or they fear that sharing about potential danger might set *us* into a panic spiral. Or, worst of all, they fully ingest our struggle to feel safe anywhere in the world and take it onto themselves.

Kids in these relational dynamics hide their needs and problems from their caregivers not because they are deceptive or shady but because they do not want to be met with anxiety or punishment, so instead of reaching out for help, they cover up their feelings and dilemmas away from our gaze.

What can we do if we have this tendency to respond to fear with control? We need to take the time to find effective ways to cope with the fears that come with the inherent vulnerability of human life.

While we cannot with certainty determine that nothing harmful will ever befall our children (remember, we are not flying the plane), especially as they age and grow in the amount of time they spend apart from us, we can put in the work be calm and centered around our own fears so that our children want to *seek our support* when they are being pursued by Saber-Toothed Sally.

Effective protection leaves a child feeling safe, not full of worry.

Pitfall #2: Mistaking Permissiveness for Protection

For anyone who grew up with parents who struggled with pitfall #1, it is fairly common to swing in the opposite direction, thinking that it solves the problem. If you had a parent who never let you leave the house without full-body armor and an alarm on every limb, you might be tempted to give your child full authority over what armor they want and forget that they are not yet prepared to understand what they are up against in the world.

If we don't set adequate boundaries or limits or structures around our children, that can backfire in the same way a controlling approach does. Instead of avoiding us in stressful moments for fear of being controlled, they avoid us in stressful moments because they don't trust that we will know what to do or how to handle it and will instead hand the authority back over to them.

Our need to be liked by them and accepted by them puts them into a parentified role.

Kids are smart. They can feel what is driving us, and when we are permissive, it is not attuned to them, it is a reaction to our unresolved insecure attachment wounds. We are worried our children will think we are trying to control them. We are afraid that they will feel reluctant to come to us when they

need us, like we felt with our parents. We are afraid that they will be disappointed in us or our decisions, which is data from our early attachment relationships and does not belong to them.

This does not mean that we need to be harsh, or to control *everything,* or to punish our children when they push back on boundaries.

It means we need to do our part to create a home environment for our children where they can safely learn, play, and develop. They need to wear helmets when they ride their bikes (rule). They need to brush their teeth on average two times per day (structure). They cannot drive our car if they are using any mind-altering substance (limit).

Healthy relationships involve limits, boundaries, and structures. Permissiveness has oversimplified the structure to be this: "If it makes you upset enough, you can do it, or have it, or I will give you something else to keep you calm instead." It prevents children from processing the world in a more communal and complex way. There are things we must do to take care of ourselves and others (apologize when we flub). There are things we cannot do to take care of ourselves and others (punch people in the teeth when they make us mad).

How do we know we have launched into a permissive mode?

We panic every time our child is frustrated at a decision we have made.

We shape our parenting decisions primarily on *how our children feel about them.*

We are more afraid of our children disliking us than we are of not giving them the structure and boundaries they need to grow and learn.

We use bribes and indulgence as our primary parenting tools.

It is hard to rely on someone who is so afraid of upsetting you that they instead give you whatever you want. That's not security. That's insecure, and our children might take advantage of it to get what they want in a moment, but I assure you, it's not what they want in the big picture. They want a confident and loving adult who is not afraid to guide them and help them learn safe and rational practices, even if that means that they have to wear sunscreen at the beach.

Pitfall #3: Mistaking Dominance as Protection

For anyone who grew up in a hostile home or hostile neighborhood/community culture, it can be tempting to believe that protection comes from dominance. That by showcasing our bravado and muscles, our children will feel safe and be protected from harm as a result.

This is the "If anyone f*cks with you, I will f*ck them up" approach to protection. Most of the time, this is a response to our pain around experiences in our growing up where we were faced with brutality and no one protected us. It is truly traumatic to be violently bullied or abused, so, of course, we don't want our children to have to experience it. It makes sense that we would conclude that we need to become someone big enough, or threatening enough, that others would no longer try to mess with us or our children.

Unfortunately this approach has a major downside.

When we showcase our willingness to utilize violence in order to protect our children, they, in turn, become *worried about our safety.* Similar to how permissiveness puts the child into a parent role, dominance-based protection does also. If our child is being hurt by someone, they now have to consider the volatility of our reaction, and how our violence may put *us*

and them into more danger. They worry we will end up in jail or do damage to someone in a way that could threaten us going forward

How do we know we have launched into a dominance mode?

We try to make our children safe by telling them how violent we are willing to become if someone hurts them.

We assess the world in terms of dominance and violence and try to comfort our children by placing ourselves above others.

We use the old "brandishing our shotgun" approach when they are building new relationships.

Years ago, I was working with a client who had severe PTSD. They had been brutally sexually abused by an adolescent neighbor starting at age five. The abuse was truly disturbing stuff, aimed not only at sexually abusing my client but also at deeply humiliating them. I was the very first person my client, at age fifty-seven, had ever shared the abuse with.

They blamed themselves that the abuse went on for nearly four solid years before their abuser moved away for college. I asked them if they ever tried to tell their parents about what was happening to them. They said one word: "Icebox."

My client's father had repeatedly told her growing up that if anyone ever hurt her, they would end up in the garage freezer. The idea was so disturbing to her that even though she did not think he truly meant the threat, it left her wondering what other form of violent reaction would come out of him if he knew the level of abuse this person had enacted on her.

She never told anyone about the abuse because she didn't want to risk also losing access to her dad, someone she truly loved and needed in her life.

While we do want our children to know that we will work to protect them from harm, they need to know that we will do that *in safe and mature ways,* and that if they ever disclose harm to us, that we will help them heal, not create equal injuries to the people who have harmed them. Our children need to know that we will be able to handle their tricky or traumatic experiences, that we will be able to stay in control and figure out what to do, and not that we will become unhinged and go bananas while grasping for dominance.

Instead of "If anyone ever hurts you, I am going to hurt them back," they need to hear, "If anyone ever hurts you, I will always believe you, make sure you are safe, and be there with you to help you heal in whatever ways you need."

"I have your back" is different than "I will break their back."

CONNECTING THE DOTS

If control, permissiveness, and dominance are not effective protection approaches, then what is?

Drumroll please…you guessed it! Secure connection.

The experience of having caregivers who are calm, empathetic, aware, and able to help when life is scary, overwhelming, or dangerous is protective not only emotionally but literally. Children who feel secure are far more likely to seek help when they are worried about something than children who have experienced insecure protection pitfalls.

How do we create that secure experience around protection?

Here are five things we can do to cultivate that dynamic with our littles (and our not-so-littles).

Work to be present and responsive. We can help cultivate trust with children by being physically *and* emotionally

present and responsive to them.

Being present with our children does not mean hovering. It means that, after school, or on the weekends, or in the car rides to and from all of the activities, we make an intentional effort to really show up *with* them and *for* them. We make concerted efforts to put our brain-sucking devices (a.k.a. our smartphones) into our pockets and out of our hands so that we listen with our whole presence. It is through this presence that we can cultivate a grounded responsiveness that our children can feel and trust.

When I get home from work, I, too, feel pulled away from presence with my children by the laundry, the dinner, the 198 emails that I wasn't able to reply to during my workday, the phone call to a friend, etc. I feel the centrifugal pull toward productivity, but I know that trust is built in the rhythms of our relationships, and if I stay task focused, I will miss out on the most important thing of all: building trust and connection with my kids. So I have to make strict guidelines for myself in order to ensure that I am giving my littles true presence and receptivity.

I do what I can to say yes and reduce distractions when my children are bidding for my time. Whether they are asking me to play superheroes, or to review a homework assignment with them, or to help them bury a dead fly they found in the windowsill. These daily rhythms of connection are adding up to an incredible internal truth for our children: "What matters to me, what is important to me, matters to my parent(s)."

I use the mantra "be all the way here" to keep me present when I am spending intentional time with my children to help me from being pulled in other directions.

I also engage and observe and attend to the "small" negative things happening in their immediate world: things like knee bonks and broken Lego towers. By being responsive

to those minor injuries and losses, I am creating a pattern of support. They can feel that I want to show up for them, that I can handle their pain and frustrations, and that I am a safe place for them to be authentically themselves. It keeps their instinct to come to me when they need me strong and intuitive. "I am hurt, Mom will help." If we can achieve that with our children, we have done something truly protective in their lives. They are not alone in their distress or danger; they have a safe haven to rely on.

Do I do this perfectly all the time? Nope. Nope. Nope. Do I do it well enough? Yup. How can I tell? They run to me when they are scared or sad, and then they soothe quickly in my arms. If that isn't true for your dynamics, take an inventory of how often you are emotionally available and responsive to their tenderness and work to increase those two practices.

Work to be consistently regulated. Our children are more likely to come to us for help or soothing if they can feel that we are *emotionally sturdy and warm.*

Running into the arms of a caregiver or parent to feel protected is not merely about safety. It is also about *feeling* safe. Our attachment instinct helps us gain regulation from the heightened body state that gets activated when we encounter a real or perceived threat. If a child runs from a saber-toothed tiger chasing them into their caregiver's arms, they need their caregiver to get them inside the house safely and lock the door, and then, to help bring their body back down to a calm state.

Obviously if you are a parent and your child was just nearly a tiger's snack pack, your own nervous system is going to be elevated as well as your child's. But as a grown-up, you have access to faster cognitive processing than your child. You are able to process the strength of your door bolt, and what you know to be true of the saber-toothed tiger's lack of resources to get in. (They don't have a key!) So, as you recognize that imminent danger has passed, your child needs

you to start to calm your nervous system so that they can borrow from that calmness and move into a state of regulation themselves.

If we stay in a heightened state during stressful moments, our children will feel fear as a response to proximity to us. Instead of finding comfort and soothing in our presence, they will feel agitated and flooded with *our* dysregulated body states.

We have to train our bodies and minds to know how to calm so that our children expect us to stay regulated and grounded even when they are not. To clarify, that does not mean that we are supposed to be non-feeling robots but rather that we are able to connect to what our children are feeling and going through while simultaneously offering them a sense that things will be okay.

"I feel you, kid, and I got you."

"Your pain is not too much for me."

"I can help you figure this out."

Work to be reliably safe. If we are safe (a.k.a. not scary) with our children, and with ourselves and anyone else they see us interacting with, they will trust that we won't lose our shitake if something happens and will be far more likely to open up to us as a result.

In various stages and moments of parenting, it can be tempting to use our size or power to get our children to do things we want them to do. And while we all have moments where we lose our sh*t, we must do everything we can to make sure that we do it as infrequently as possible and with the least intensity we can.

Because if we are scary to our children, even if our underlying goal is in their best interest, if we use intimidation

or threats to cultivate submission in our children, they will become afraid of us. At least in part.

They need to know that we will never intentionally hurt them. That even when we are at our wit's end, they are safe with us.

When the inevitable moment comes where we snap harder than feels safe or good, we need to repair as quickly as we can by taking ownership of our behavior and understanding how it impacted our child. Then we need to do the work to identify what we can do to prevent that response from us in the future.

Work to be collaborative. Involving our children in their protection process helps them to trust our decisions as well as empowers them to be a part of their own protection.

When we are working to keep our children safe and protected, it is important that we not only dole out boundaries and lessons but that we take the time to listen to our children's perspectives on the safety issues at hand as well. By asking them what they think is the smart choice or if they have a unique perspective or solution to offer, we are ensuring that they are learning to take responsibility for their well-being and safety.

This is different from permissiveness. We are not saying, "Do you want to wear your helmet or not?" We are saying, "I hear you that you really don't want to wear your helmet. Can you help me understand why? Is it physically uncomfortable? Perhaps we can work together to add some padding to the helmet. Is it socially uncool with your peers? I remember feeling like that too; it can be hard to make a smart choice when our friends are not doing the same. Is it the particular helmet you have currently? Maybe we can search Facebook Marketplace for a helmet that fits your current style more."

When we actively listen to our children's resistance to something in the area of protection, it helps them to trust that

we are not merely warlords interested in having total dominion over their choices. We are their parents, and it is important to do what we can to keep them safe, but also that we do so while holding the understanding that there are many different ways to skin a spider. (Sorry, spider lovers, I have two cats, so I just can't get on board with the original saying.)

When our children are in hot water, we want them to run into the safety of our arms, anticipating that we will help them *get safe* and *feel safe* and that they will *have a voice* in that process.

I remember a particular day when my son was in first grade. As he stepped off the bus, I could see something was wrong, and as soon as the bus pulled away, I asked if something was wrong, and he broke down crying so hard, he couldn't even speak. I picked him up and we went and sat in our front lawn, where I held him in my arms while he cried out some of the pain. After a minute or two, he was able to breathe and he told me that a couple of friends at school had been teasing him about his take-home folder, saying that it was a girl folder and laughing at him. I honestly don't even remember what the folder looked like, but it was something he had loved when he bought it.

Sitting with his little heaving body as he processed the pain of being mocked by his peers, I internally started making a plan for how I would talk to his teacher about the issue and make sure she was aware that this type of teasing was occurring at this table. (She probably didn't know.) I wanted to make sure that this teasing stopped. I have worked hard to teach my children that they can love and like whatever they are drawn to. Leadership is for everyone. Dancing is for anyone who wants to dance. Being open about our feelings and getting support from others is for everyone. And all the colors belong to us all.

After he had told the whole story and I listened thoughtfully with him, his little body started to melt and his whole demeanor changed. He felt better. Since I have had the luxury of being a therapist for so long and watching parents engage in these types of moments, I knew that my next move needed to be collaborative.

I asked him what he needed. He was six, so he said, “I don’t know.” So I gave him some suggestions.

I could contact the parents of these friends and have us all meet to talk about this.

I could send Mrs. Goosetree an email to tell her what happened or ask her to meet us in person.

He could talk to Mrs. Goosetree himself.

He could try to tell his friends how that made him feel and that he wants them to stop.

He took a pensive moment and thought about his options. He decided he wanted to tell Mrs. Goosetree but that he wanted to do it himself with me next to his side. And he did it. While Mrs. Goosetree’s reaction was less than ideal, as she basically answered with a “boys will be boys” response, my son felt empowered.

He then spoke directly with his friends, who respected his courage and agreed they would all work on being nicer to each other. By staying connection focused and collaborative, my son felt protected by me and empowered to stand up for himself. A skill that many of us did not learn until well into our adulthoods, am I right?

Be flexible over time. Our protection efforts need to evolve in tandem with our child’s needs, capacities, and environments. The protective role our children need us to play when they are two is very different from the protection role

they need us to play when they are a junior high student or a newly minted parent.

As our children develop and grow, their instinct to explore the world with more independence will increase over time. What that looks like is different for every child, but it is a part of the parenting process to slowly release our children further and further into the world with less and less direct protection from us and more and more support and empowerment for them to make the choices they need to feel safe and protected in the world.

As our children grow into adults, they still need us. The desire to feel seen, heard, connected to, and protected by a securely attached parent is a lifelong desire. Even when the world is cold and cruel to them, they know that our warmth and kindness is there for them to rely on.

One of my favorite quotes from Brené Brown comes from her *Wholehearted Parenting Manifesto* and says this: "When uncertainty and scarcity visit…I will want to take away your pain, but instead I will sit with you and teach you how to feel it."

This is the heart of connection as protection: "I will be there for you, kid. I will help you process your pain and you will not be alone. And as you grow, you will come to know one of the most important lessons in human life: pain can not only teach us lessons on how to be more safe or more protected; it can teach us how to receive care and nurture from the people we are attached to." And when we share our pain with safe and loving people, we not only heal, we become more resilient than we were before we went through the hard thing. This is the greatest protection of all: to know that we are not alone in navigating our pain.

> **PARENTING PERSPECTIVE**
>
> **The Role of a Father**

> What is fatherhood? It's all the sleepless nights trying to help them sleep and feel safe, and then taking our kids out into the world without enough diapers. It's bathing four little bodies then putting those four to sleep every night and hoping that you did it right that day. It's more than showing up, it's being present. It's watching all their little idiosyncrasies and being amazed how incredibly different every single one of them is. Fatherhood is never forgetting my father who did the best he could with what he had, but also trying to take it further and build on top of that legacy. It's attempting to give myself grace even when I feel like I'm failing over and over. Lastly, it's remembering I am living my ancestors' wildest dreams and will impart our cultural struggle and triumphs so my children are proud of their heritage and know they are part of something bigger than themselves.
>
> — HECTOR VELAZQUEZ, marriage and family therapist, father of two sets of twins

A WORD ON PARTNERS AND CO-PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS

It can be incredibly challenging and heartbreaking when our children's other attachment figures are not willing (or able) to learn secure patterns. We can see the pain that is being cultivated in their relationship and how it is impacting our child. Even when those interactions are only "mildly" problematic, it can be hard to know what we can or should do.

First, I want to reassure all of us about something: when we cultivate a secure attachment pattern with our children, we offer them a protective factor in their life that helps them cope with other potentially stressful or harmful relationships. While we cannot change someone else, we can continue to stay true

to the mature ways that we engage our child in their developmental journey.

Second, I want to remind us all that the most influential thing we can do with other adults in our life is to model secure attachment. Our empathetic approach might be questioned in the early years while our children still meltdown over small things, but as they age, the proof is the pudding. Their confidence and flexibility and considerate spirits will give way for others to see how powerful a connection focused approach is for parenting.

Third, remember that if someone has a hard time connecting with a child, caring for a child, or understanding a child, it is extremely likely that they were a child who received none of those things. So harsh responses to them won't teach them anything new. Our job is to simply invite them to consider seeing the child and their own childhood in new ways. They either will or will not accept that invitation, which is not ours to convince.

NERD ALERT: The Difference Between Fear and Anxiety

Fear and anxiety are both safety-related emotional states activated in our nervous system, but their realities are significantly different in terms of their function and impact on our lives.

Fear is a body state that activates in response to present or perceived present danger. Fear is what happened in my body when my brain recognized the rattlesnake sweethearts making whoopee in my backyard.

Fear propels our body to react to a stimulus that could potentially harm us in the moment. It is an incredibly helpful state of emotion. I trust my

fear and honor it whenever it arises. Even if it turns out that what my body reacted to was, in fact, a garden hose and not a snake, my fear is doing what it can to keep me from danger.

Fear is our body's safety assistant, stepping in when something could be harmful to us.

Anxiety is a body state that activates in response to thoughts about future potential danger. Unlike its cousin, fear, anxiety is more of a barrier to well-being than it is an assistant to safety.

Anxiety is a prolonged state of fear that activates after an encounter with danger, or as a result of a thought or story we encounter about a terrifying scenario. Anxiety can arise when there is no real or present danger, which means that rather than alerting us to something we can react to, it prevents us from being able to absorb and trust in a situation that is actually safe.

Fear gets between us and danger, whereas anxiety gets between us and safe feelings. It robs us of the moments where we can let our guard down and play and enjoy life. Whenever you feel yourself caught in a loop of anxious thoughts about the future, try this:

Look around your immediate setting and assess for any current and active danger. If you are in active danger, get outta there or fight like a lion! If you are not in active danger, then I want you to take a deep breath and let yourself absorb the safety of the environment you are in. Tell yourself something caring like, "It's okay that you felt scared, and it's okay to let your guard down and trust in this safety right now."

Consider the anxiety about the future that is bothering you and ask yourself this: “Is there anything I can do right now to prevent this future fear from occurring?” If yes, make a plan to do it. After you’ve made a plan, I want you to imagine that anxiety dissipating like salt into a glass of water. You made a plan so you don’t need it anymore.

Call a caring friend and ask them to be a part of your antianxiety initiative. Tell them about the thing that was making you anxious, the plan you made, and your determination to cut ties with that anxiety. Then ask them to encourage you in that choice and to be available to help you release that anxiety if it comes back up to bother you again.

Lastly, if someone relates to our child in insecure ways, but our child has secure relating from us, the most likely outcome will be that the other adult will not have the joy and privilege of close authentic connection with our child in the way we do. It is not our job to make sure our child is close to all the adults in their life, it’s our job to make sure they can be close enough with us to process whatever other dynamics they are experiencing.

If, however, we believe these other attachment figures in our child’s life are beyond insecure relating and are abusive or causing harm to our child, then we need to seek outside support to help us do what we can to limit their access.

It is never easy to see another adult acting in relationally immature ways, but it is also never in our control. We can invite and speak the truth in a loving way, but in the end, the only thing we can truly have control over in our children’s attachment experiences is who we choose to be in their life.

NINE

The Tricky Topics

THE MENTIONING

One of my all-time favorite quotes for secure parenting is a quote by Mr. Fred Rogers: “Whatever is mentionable is manageable.” Whatever topics we are able to talk about calmly and openly with our children, we will be far more capable of managing as well. In some shape or form, our children will come into contact with these very tricky things, whether it is personally, through someone they care about, or via something they watch from a distance either virtually or in real life:

Drugs and alcohol

Addiction

Bullying

Sexual abuse

Sexual assault

Sexual harassment

Racism

Gender

Suicidal thoughts

Natural disasters

Death

Puberty

Sexuality

Porn addiction

War

Body differences

Politics

Suicide

History

Oof. I felt that. I know you did too. This is an overwhelming list. Let me reassure all of us for a minute: *We do not need to have all of the answers* (not possible with this list), but our children *do* need us to have a calm and secure way of showing them that we can *figure these things out together as they come up.*

We do that by being the leaders in initiating these conversations when possible, and by showing our children that we can guide them and learn beside them in a calm and connected way.

If we don't take the time to acknowledge the existence of these tricky things, our children will assume that they are "off-limits" topics and seek other potentially less reliable sources for information.

I know that you and I are not going to hold the exact same values, perspectives, or experiences on all of these tricky topics. As I share with you some thoughts on secure ways to have these conversations, you may notice that I have a value or two that you do not share. That is to be expected. The point of this chapter is to help us all find a way to get as comfortable as we can with these uncomfortable topics so that our children can trust us to support them in navigating whatever they encounter in their lives around them.

The more securely we can offer them a safe place to explore these tricky topics, the more likely they will be to seek us out and reflect honestly with us if/when one of these topics is affecting their well-being.

FINDING THE "RIGHT-ISH" TIME TO BRING UP A TRICKY TOPIC

When it comes to tricky topics, there isn't a one-size-fits-all guide for *exactly* when to address something, or in what particular approach. Finding the right-ish timing depends on multiple variables. In the event that we are lucky enough to be the person who introduces these biggies to our littles/not-so-little-anymores, here are some guidelines on determining the right-ish timing.

When strategizing about the how, where, and when to mention tricky topics to our children, we need to stay in tune with our children's *current exposure* to a specific topic, *risk factors* to their safety related to it, their *curiosity* about it, and their *capacity to process and understand* the various elements related to it.

Exposure

While we have some control over what topics our children are exposed to, outside sources often activate our child's first awareness of a topic. If other children are likely to be engaging in awareness of a tricky topic, it is a good time to bring it up ourselves. For instance, my son taught his friend Bill that "boys can fall in love with boys" on the school bus when they were in first grade. I have several beloved family members who identify as LGBTQ+ so my son had high exposure in this arena via my family members, which meant that Bill had moderate exposure as a result. (I called Bill's mom and let her know that we'd let that particular cat out of the closet.)

Exposure will vary from kid to kid, community to community, and topic to topic. What they see on TV, or the internet, or who they socialize with will have an influence on what they hear and know. While we can moderate these exposures when they are young, our children usually have

increased exposure to all of these topics just by being in the greater community.

Risk Factors

It's worth offering early education about some potential exposures to play it safe. This is especially true in the context of abuse prevention. Because our children can experience abuse at any age, we want to do what we can to make it possible for them to communicate to us if someone attempts or succeeds at harming them.

I have had parents feel reticent about these discussions for fear of their children losing innocence. I would argue that an informed child is still innocent, and it is that very information that might help protect them from abuse, which is the experience that actually fragments their innocence.

I am very passionate about early discussions around sexual abuse to help empower children and give them the language they need to share if anything ever does happen or almost happen to them. I will go into this process in detail as an example at the end of this chapter, so hang tight for that to come.

Assessing for risk is about recognizing what present threats exist to our children and other children they encounter around any given topic. In terms of sexual abuse, we know that one in three girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before they are eighteen years of age. It's a statistic that warrants us talking through that tricky topic from a young age.

What are the real threats to our child based on their age, their surrounding community, environment, and so on? We probably don't need to talk about the effects of fentanyl-laced recreational drugs with our three-year-olds, but we would want to talk with them about the dangers of overdosing on medicine that looks like candy (orange Advil, anyone?).

Curiosity

The third variable to assess for tricky topic readiness is our child's level of curiosity about a topic. Are they asking questions about the topic? Are they drawing pictures about it? Talking about it in imaginative play? Do they want to know more, or are they disinterested or not ready to hear?

When my son was five, he asked me the classic "where do babies come from?" question. After all of my years as a therapist, I felt like that player on the bench warmed up and ready to go! "Put me in coach!" I knew to respond factually and simply and not to say something dismissive like, "You're too young to know that."

I said, "Babies are made when a sperm and an egg fertilize and then attach to a uterus and grow there."

He said, "What is a uterus?"

I said, "A muscle in some people's bodies that can hold a baby while they grow." I pointed at my stomach and said, "You grew in my uterus, it's right here in my abdomen."

He asked me, "Do I have a uterus?"

I said, "No, you do not, neither does Dad."

He looked forlorn, so I asked him, "Do you feel sad about that?" and he broke into tears and cried. I comforted him and held him while he processed the grief he felt over this realization.

He then looked up and asked me, "Can you get me a brother and a sister, please?"

This must have been the desire that triggered the initial line of questioning. I told him that I was not in control of the sibling selection process and would do my best.

I then told him it was brave to ask questions and learn about these things and that if he had any follow-up questions, I

would be there to answer them.

It was *two years* later that he had a follow-up question.

It was a similar question, but with a more mature curiosity beneath it.

"Mom, how do babies get made?"

I started with the science: "A sperm fertilizes an egg, and it turns into a blastocyst that embeds in a uterus and becomes a fetus."

Without a blink, he said, "Yeah, I know that, but how does the sperm get to the egg?"

The wheels had been turning in those two years.

He was ready to hear more. I stayed with his exact question and said, "It can get there through IVF/IUI, or it can get there through a penis entering a vagina and sending the sperm up through to the uterus."

He looked horrified. "Why would anyone want to do that?"

I said, "It's a grown-up thing, not a kid thing, so it makes sense that you're confused by it. Do you have any more questions about that?"

He shook his head no and promptly changed the topic.

That was enough about the tricky topic of procreation to satisfy his seven-year-old wondering. And when he asks next, it will likely be because another leap in maturity has activated new curiosity, either because he is exposed to something that increases his awareness or because his changing body activates new wondering.

His curiosity is an important guide through this particular conversation.

Capacity for Processing and Understanding

I did not expand on my seven-year-old's question about how the sperm gets to the uterus, not because it is a shameful topic but because he was not developmentally in a place where he would have been able to process information about sexual engagement. He wanted to know *the science behind human formation* and had no clue about the very big reveal surrounding sexual development.

He will, however, soon be filled with hormones that slowly cultivate sexual arousal in his body. He will develop interest in the topic, and we will expand on this topic with him through educational books and important conversations. The nuances of his curiosity will develop, as will his capacity to understand sexual development.

Sometimes our children get exposed without being ready for the exposure. What then? For example, when my son was four, he woke up around ten p.m. and came down to our bedroom. Our door was closed, but we don't have a lock on it. You see where I am going with this? Grown-up things were happening with me and my partner, and my son did not knock.

We were below the bedsheet, but he is a keen kiddo and knew something novel was happening that he had never encountered before. We were both naked. So that's weird. He asked why and what we were doing. So I found the best explanation that I could and said, "We were hugging each other," and he said, "Naked?" and I said, "Yeah, it's a thing that adults do." And he said, "Okay, I'm thirsty."

Even though he was exposed, and curious, he was not developmentally ready to process what he had encountered. So, I did not give my four-year-old the full dissertation on sex. Had he asked more questions, I would have continued to limit the amount of information I shared based on his age and stage of development.

I know another kiddo who was exposed in a way that made limiting much more of a challenge. At eight years old, he was exposed to pornography by a neighbor friend who had his own smartphone. The neighbor child went through video after video showing this child a wide variety of sexual acts. This could not be explained away as "adult hugging."

This kiddo did have to learn a bit more about human sexuality and the difference between real-life sex and pornographic portrayals of it. His parents still worked to keep it at an age-appropriate level by saying, "There are many ways that grown-ups can show their love to each other. Just like we can hug or high five or hold hands to show you our love, as we get older, there are other creative ways that adults can explore that expression together."

This exposure was not ideal, but his parents were still able to take off the burden of full comprehension and help answer his questions based on his stage of life.

READY, GET SET, TALK!

Let's imagine that we have checked all four boxes on a tricky topic. Our child is exposed in some significant way, there is some risk to them related to the topic, or they have questions about the topic and they are developmentally able to process the content. We have concluded that *they* are ready; now, we need to make sure that *we* are ready.

Here are the things that we can do to prepare for the conversation and set us and our children up for the optimal connecting and learning experience.

Calming Ourselves

The first step to being a person our children can rely on in the tricky topics of life is to be honest with ourselves about which

topics are triggering for us, and may lead to avoidance or overreaction on our part?

What is unmentionable for us? What topics make our toes curl and our anxiety peak? If something feels unmentionable for us, it can be because:

- No adult in our life was ever comfortable talking through it with us
- We have an unresolved trauma related to this particular topic

NERD ALERT: Internal Scripts

Even though our children grow in their independence from us over time, our relationship becomes internally embedded in their minds in the form of what the researchers call “attachment representations and mental scripts.”

In other words, the way we speak to our children, especially in times of emotion and need, becomes the inner voice they hear when they encounter emotions and needs in the future.

This is also true for us as parents. We hold scripts in our minds that developed in relation to how our parents handled the tricky moments in our childhood. Whether or not we hold internalized “secure scripts” is correlated with whether we respond to our children in secure ways.

In an important study on this topic, Waters and Rodrigues-Doolabh had adult research participants take the Adult Attachment Interview to assess for attachment pattern, and then gave them groups of words to create a story related to an attachment scenario. The words were of an emotional nature

to ensure that participants would have to activate a tender or emotional scene.

Through this process, it could be assessed whether a person had an instinct to write a story with a secure script. A secure base script was defined as a sequence of events where a caregiver is supportive, responsive, available, effectively helpful, and brings comfort in their presence, allowing a sense of resolution.

What they found is that the more coherent the participant's results (indicating a secure state of mind, which is correlated with secure attachment in childhood), the more access the person had to secure scripts in the story exercise. This is why it is so important to use supportive language when our children are feeling complex things or working through tricky topics. Our voice is becoming theirs. Our caring responses are becoming their instincts to be compassionate and kind to themselves in moments when they are physically away from us.

• We have a catastrophic belief about this topic that floods our mind

Whatever bullet points this topic hits on for us, it is our duty to our children to address them. If we are not able to enter into a state of calmness, our children will not be able to either. Instead of having a learning experience, we will end up in a defensive debate or awkward silence, neither of which will create the kind of awareness and empowerment we want to hand our children around these tricky things.

If we can't settle ourselves around a particular topic, it is time to reach out for support. That could be with a wise and caring friend who we know has some confidence around the issue, or who knows us and our story so well that they can

help us untangle our feelings about it. Or it can be a therapist or other guide in our life who can make space for us to process what is getting activated for us.

Educating Ourselves

The second step is to put in some research on this particular topic and how it is impacting children in a different generation than us. We all know that our parents can be out of touch with the ways the world changed between their childhood and ours, but we also need to remember the same is true from our childhood to our child's. They are living in a different world than we are.

Let's say the topic is drug and alcohol use and abuse. We need to understand what is actually happening in our particular community around that topic. Are twelve-year-olds accessing pot? Do they even call it that? The answer is: not in Bothell, Washington. Well, they are accessing it, and smoking it, but they don't call it "pot." One of my best friends, Dawn, teaches at an alternative high school there and recently stumbled upon this change in vernacular when talking with a few of her students. They *literally* didn't know what she was talking about when she used the term "pot." They just say "smoking" to mean smoking marijuana, like, "Do you smoke?" means, "Do you use marijuana?" By the time my children are twelve, it may be a totally different verb.

We can research in many different ways. Here are some ideas to get you started.

- Ask teachers what they are seeing happening with the topic.
- Look up local statistics about the topic.
- Find handouts that have scientific study references.
- Search the internet for actual studies: What do scientists know about a particular element of the topic? For instance,

we know that when teenagers smoke too much (see how I did that, I used *their* term, even though I felt the need to add "pot" to specify), it can affect the way their brain develops.

We want to bring objective facts from multiple perspectives so that we and our children can be as informed and up-to-date as possible. When I was helping my son understand the decisions I made around technology limits that were different than the decisions many of his friends' families made, I brought him some scientific research about the benefits of spending time in nature, the importance of free-creative time for children, and an article talking about dopamine's effect on the brain in addiction. It helped him understand that I had information guiding me, which led to greater acceptance of the structure I set up around devices.

Managing Our Expectations

When we are entering into a tricky conversation, we need to manage our expectations so that we are prepared for the many different directions that it might go. If we hold too closely to a desired outcome, it might make it hard for our children to be authentic in the conversation.

Accept that there are many different ways our child might feel while talking about any tricky topic. Scared, sad, overwhelmed, underwhelmed, bored, angry, surprised, confused, and even slap-happy (a nervous reaction that can appear to be disrespectful but is really a reaction to discomfort). What might seem very serious to us might feel run of the mill to our children. Or what seems sacred and like a rite of passage to us might feel like yesterday's news to children who are being raised in the age of information.

Expect that these conversations are ongoing and not one-time deals. These topics are complex, and so we can't cover all

the pieces and scenarios in one conversation. We want to see it as the beginning of an open and ongoing dialogue.

Be ready for our children to take a passive role and not engage in the ways we hoped. If we push for engagement, we are unlikely to get authentic engagement. Instead, we want to have room for the reality that they may not be emotionally ready to have the discussion with us in particular, or on the topic in general.

Prepare for our children to have strong opinions that they have formed outside of our home and may not be in line with the values and ideologies we want them to hold. This can be incredibly triggering and scary as a parent. But if we manage this expectation, we can be a far more effective support to our children in their learning process.

"I DON'T KNOW" AS AUTHENTIC CONNECTION

The pressure on parents of the modern age to know all about everything and how to handle it all is truly insane. *And* it can collapse a very important component of co-regulation and connection: not knowing together.

If we are able to explain an idea, or give an answer that helps to soothe our children, that is great! But we can't always. Some realities do not have easy answers. So many things that happen to people, or to the world around us, cannot be easily understood.

Sometimes the most secure response with a tricky topic is to say, "I am asking myself the same question, and I don't know." When my son asked me why my aunt died of cancer when she wasn't as old as my grandma, I had no answer to give. I knew it was terrible and sad and affected our family deeply, but I couldn't, under any good conscience, give a rational answer as to why this happened.

Instead, I said, “I don’t think there is any good reason for someone’s death. It is just really, really sad, and it is confusing to our hearts.” Our kids need us to show up in comfort and presence for the *whats* of the tricky topics and experiences far more than they need us to fuddle through to find a *why*. There are so many things in life that have very little to no logic or *why*, but a whole boatload of pain and processing that we can focus on instead.

PARENTING PERSPECTIVE

The Courage to Be Fully Known

It takes courage for kids and teens to come out to their parents about things that don’t match their parent’s dreams or expectations. Coming out can be about a desired career that doesn’t match our family’s expectations, or telling the truth about an experience of abuse from a trusted family friend. For me, coming out was about letting my family and community know that I’m gay. This was deeply complicated by the fact that I was raised in an evangelical Christian home and attending a Bible College that explicitly taught us that being gay was a very big deliberate sin against God. At the time the pain of disappointment and rejection seemed bigger than even death. Fast forward more than twenty years later and my wife and I have a beautiful family and are mothers to our nine-year-old twins. Someday when my children need to come out to me about something important, my hope is that having gone through my own life-altering coming out, I’ll be able to reach down deep and offer the support and understanding they need from me. I want to give them a parent who can hold their hand and remember the bravery it takes to come out and let oneself be fully known.

> — CANDICE CZUBERNAT, therapist and founder of the Christian Closet and Affirming Therapy, gay mom of twins

INCLUDING OUR VILLAGE

Our children are not meant to navigate big things alone, and neither are we. If you have people in your world that you trust to be a part of these conversations, be creative about a role they can play to help in some way.

Ask a friend to share a real-life story with your child about how the topic impacted their life. (I already have a friend I plan on asking to share his addiction and recovery journey with my children so they can grasp how real the issue is.)

Recruit one of your smarty-pants friends to do some research for you/with you so that you have some trusted information to use in your conversations.

Ask a whole group of people to be a part of a rite-of-passage day or weekend where you share stories and give encouragement and open up your child to new dialogues they are now old enough to be a part of. I plan to do this with all of my children at thirteen, to take special adults from my life and to give them a ceremonial weekend being ushered into a new stage of their development.

Request prayers or thoughts or awareness from people in support of you and your child. They could text you or write them ahead to help give you courage if you need it!

TRICKY TOPIC 101: SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION

I wish so badly this tricky topic/reality didn't exist for our children. And I hope with all of my heart that, a hundred years from now, people will look back at this conversation and think, "Good grief! Our ancestors were dealing with sexual abuse? Thank goodness we've evolved out of that BS!" For

now, we head straight into the eye of the topic and do what we can to educate and empower our children as best we can.

Teaching Anatomically Correct Names for Body Parts

Children cannot protect themselves from sexual abuse if they cannot accurately describe the parts of their bodies and other people's bodies that are most likely to be engaged in sexually abusive ways.

Children also cannot effectively testify against an adult in a legal proceeding if they are not able to use language that collapses any "reasonable doubt" in the criminal prosecution. It is our job to separate bodies from sex so that our children can feel ownership and comfort over all of their body parts and therefore be less vulnerable to sexual predators.

If this is uncomfortable for you to do, it is likely because it was uncomfortable for your caregivers too. One mental hack I suggest to my clients to get over their discomfort with the anatomically correct words is to remind themselves that the most sexual organ in the human body is not below our belts; it is in our heads, our brain. It is not the penis or the clitoris that mitigates arousal and sexual pleasure; it is the mind sending signals to those body parts.

We are *totally* comfortable telling children they have a brain, because we don't think of it as a sexual part, and we recognize that it functions in many ways outside of sexual arousal.

The same is true for vulvas, penises, breasts, nipples, urethras, and anuses. In fact, if you think about it, we use all of those body parts *way* less for sexual engagement than we do for all their other purposes. I use my vulva primarily for urination far more frequently than I do for sex. Just saying.

Start using anatomically correct names as soon as you can! Begin at birth, if possible, to help you and your child acclimate to the scientific words.

Body Safety Boundaries

In order to address the topic of abuse, we have to first establish with our children body safety rules. Body safety rules are the boundaries that we establish to help our children alert to scenarios that are violating. In my home, we combine rules about nonviolence with rules about private parts.

EXAMPLES OF BODY SAFETY RULES

- No hitting, kicking, biting, pushing, pinching, or slapping.
- No kissing on the mouth. Why? Because bacteria and viruses spread through our mouths.
- No touching body parts that are covered when we wear our swimming suits. No touching vulvas, nipples, penises, testicles, or anuses. Why? Because those parts are easily injured due to the fact that they are made of sensitive skin and can easily get infected.
- No secrets about touching. Why? Because secrets make us feel scared and worried, and keep us from getting help from our safe adults when we need it. (Surprises are different, they are happy things that we are waiting to share at a special time!)

If you have a child who still requires diaper changes or needs help wiping, you can add an exception to these rules for toileting, but also highlight that no one who is wiping or changing should be spending lots of time doing so; it should be quick and focused on cleaning only.

Body safety rules are taught through our interactions with our children before they are verbal, but then, around age two, they need to become verbal and visual lessons.

By comfortably and frequently discussing body boundaries, we empower our children to understand what a violation would be if an adult or another child attempted or completed an inappropriate engagement with their body. If we can't talk about body safety, our children won't be able to share with us if/when someone interacts unsafely with their body.

I started the overt conversation about body safety rules with my children around age two, but if your kids are older than that, it is never too late to start!

Affection Autonomy

Sexual abuse and trauma do not only occur in situations where someone is forced at gunpoint, or physically injured in the process. They can happen in dynamics where someone is coercive or manipulative. A child might be convinced that they need to do something out of guilt or out of obligation to a close relative or friend.

This is why we want our children to learn from the get-go that they are in charge of who, what, when, and how long when it pertains to affectionate touch. Even with Grandma. If we give our children ownership over affection, it allows them to say no to hugs or kisses with anyone at any time. I always ask my kids if they want a goodbye hug or kiss when we are heading off to work and school so that they know that they can say no.

It is hard to say no to people in general but definitely a challenge to say no to things that are seen as "nice" like hugs and kisses. When children are forced to hug and kiss their elders, it puts them in a position of confusion when a peer or elder then tries to force them to do something sexual and seemingly in the vein of "affection."

I tell my children: “You get to decide if you want a hug or a kiss on the cheek, or if you’d rather wave or give a high five.” Later on, when someone tries to pressure them into other acts of unwanted affection, they will have had lots of practice saying no despite someone else pressuring or guilting them.

The Sexual Abuse Talk

Once our children are around the age of four or five, they start to process the world with greater complexity and can usually understand the difference between danger and safety. This is a great time to have an overt talk with them about sexual abuse.

If we can talk with our children about the risks of running into the street (you could get hit by a car) or the risks of swimming without floating devices (you could drown), then why does it feel so much harder to talk with them about the risks of sexual abuse? Because of the stigma.

It’s a tricky topic that brings about shame and confusion for survivors and makes it complicated to process as a result. Also because sexual abuse creates a more insidious and complex injury than a car does.

As a trauma-focused therapist, I have seen the profound impact that sexual abuse leaves on a person and, specifically, when they are never able to share about their abuse and ask for help when it is happening. We may not be able to prevent our children from being sexually harmed, but we can cultivate a conversation with them that helps them reach for us and trust us to help if anything ever does happen to them.

Important things to mention in the talk:

Introduce the topic. “There are people, some are grown-ups and some are kids, who might try to get you to do uncomfortable and confusing things with your body or their body.”

Explain the scenarios. “It is never okay for anyone to try to touch your private parts, ask you to touch their private parts, or touch their private parts in front of you, or try to show you pictures or videos of other people’s private parts. That is called sexual abuse, and it can hurt your body and your heart.”

Describe grooming. “The grown-ups who try to do this to children might bribe you or make you feel extra special so you feel guilty for saying no. They might also scare you or threaten you to make you feel scared of saying no.”

Make a plan. “If that ever happens, do your best to get away from that adult or child and find one of your safe grown-ups to ask for help. I will always believe you and help you if you tell me that happened.”

After introducing a huge topic like the sexual abuse talk, make sure to ask your children if they have any follow-up questions.

Make sure to check in with them again the next day to see how they are processing the information and if any new curiosities have arisen, and then add it to your regular check-in to continue to communicate that this is a discussable topic in your home. “I wanted to check in with you to ask if anyone has done anything or said anything that has made you feel creepy or uncomfortable lately?”

ENTHUSIASTIC CONSENT

As our children enter adolescence, they begin to develop sexual feelings and curiosity, which changes the complexity around this topic. Before sexual development, the idea that someone would try to touch their private parts was at least incredibly strange, if not downright revolting. But as they develop, they begin to understand this new function of their body parts.

Now, several tricky topics all collide at once. Body changes and puberty, sexual development, and sexual safety.

The positive nuances increase but so do the opportunities for sexual trauma, unfortunately.

I want to recognize that there is a wide spectrum of cultural and spiritual perspectives on sexual development that may affect the way that you engage your children around this topic. Whether you are someone who is comfortable with your teens becoming sexually active or you are someone who strongly advocates for delayed sexual engagement, it is important that we all communicate to our children the importance of consent, even around things like holding hands or a peck on the cheek.

Affectionate touch is problematic when it is not a two-way consenting experience. We want our children to experience sweetheart touch with full freedom to say, “No,” “Not yet,” or “Not like that” and with full respect for other people’s freedom to say, “No,” “Not yet,” or “Not like that.” We want our children to feel worthy to be asked and never to feel obligated to acquiesce just because someone else wants to do something.

I teach my children to always ask before giving any kind of affection and to be enthusiasm detectives. To look at other people’s faces and bodies to search for clues on how they are feeling. If they ask to hold hands and the other person says, “Okay,” but looks deeply uncomfortable, to check in again and make sure that person knows that there is no pressure and no consequence if they say no.

Our tweens, teens, and young adult children need to be empowered to understand that, no matter how old they are, no matter what they felt at the beginning of an encounter, or what anyone else felt at the beginning of an encounter, it is always okay to say, “No,” “Not yet,” or “Not like that.” Affectionate touch is only safe when it is truly mutual.

TEN

When Letting Go Is Staying Close

When our children grow up, they also grow *out.* Which is what we hope for and want to celebrate when it happens, *and* it comes with loss and vulnerability. It is both happy and joyful when our children gain independence, and simultaneously sad and scary. Regardless of the feelings it activates inside our bodies, learning to let go is an important part of being able to maintain close relationships with our children no matter what stage of dependence or independence they are in. As our children grow in their desire for independence, they need us to continue to hold them close in our hearts but also to accept that they want (and need) for us to learn how to let go of them in many practical ways so that they can go on and forge their own life paths.

Learning how to let go of our children as they grow is as much a part of secure attachment as holding them close when they need our support. When we successfully offer our children the safe haven and secure base that they need in relation to us, their next step is to launch from our arms and homes and into other arms and places of living. Do we still exist in their lives and matter to them? Of course! But they do not need us in the same way they did before.

Sometimes letting go is short term, like dropping off our child for their first day of kindergarten. Despite knowing that the separation will last only a handful of hours, the experience of letting them go this far can still be full of emotion for us and for them. It is good for us to use these smaller letting-go scenarios to practice accepting our child's life journey.

Sometimes the letting go is much more significant, especially once our teens hit late adolescence, and definitely when they are finally ready to move out of our home to the great wild world.

OF MICE AND CHILDREN

Have you ever read John Steinbeck's classic novel *Of Mice and Men*? I am not sure that I have read the entire book, as I "read" it in high school as a part of my American literature curriculum, but there is one particular scene in the text that I 100 percent read and remember.

One of the main characters, Lennie, has this pet mouse that he is obsessed with. He loves holding it and petting it and keeping it close in his hands. He loves it so much that he loves it *to death.* He then proceeds to keep the dead mouse in his pocket so he can pull it out and feel comfort from its softness.

Eww. Let us use Lennie's mistake with his mouse to prevent us from making a similar mistake with our children. When we hold on too tight as our children start to launch outwardly, we can very easily suffocate our relationship with them, suffocating the life out of it.

Things like guilt and anxious helicoptering, and constant advice giving, are the types of relational dynamics that get in the way of our children being able to feel close to us at the same time that they increase their autonomy.

Just like Lennie and his mouse, it makes sense that we adore the experience of having our children in our pockets: in childhood, with their arms wrapped around our necks, their bodies snuggled up in our laps while we read, and their feet running in our direction when they are in need. What an absolute honor and treasure it is when we get to have them in our keeping for the season that they need us to. Even when our offspring sprout armpit hair and choose different political

affiliations, our children are always *our children.* Our hearts will always long to hold them close.

But. We must contend with the truth that our children do not belong to us. Rather, our love belongs to them. And in belonging to them, our love goes with them, wherever they go.

Which is why things get messy in our relationship with them when we try to keep their love close instead of releasing them into whatever next stage of independence they are seeking. Instead of them feeling loved, they feel suffocated. Which, sadly, makes it harder for them to feel our love.

We need to be wary of the impulse to tighten our grip on our children when they start making routes out of our hands.

Signs we are responding to our children's growing independence with a deadly Lennie grip

We take it personally when they want to do things without our help and punish them relationally by being grumpy toward or mocking of their independent desires.

- We don't let them do things on their own and take over when they try.
- We feel rejected when they form close relationships with other people and criticize their choices in friends or partners.
- We guilt them when they are away from us, or make changes in what type of affection they want or need from us.
- We micromanage their choices and keep watch over every step they take, even when they ask us to stop.
- We badger them to follow our advice when it is clear they are choosing a different path.

Tightening our grip won't keep our children emotionally close to us; it will keep them feeling trapped in their dynamics with us.

Things we can do when we feel the urge to Lennie our kids

Identify what fears or sorrow lie beneath the gripping instinct. This can be done in solo reflecting but is best done with supportive people. Basically, we need some co-regulation support to help us process the emotions that are driving the urge to stuff our children back in our pockets.

Develop understanding and empathy for the newfound independence our children are utilizing. Remember what it was like when you first had the opportunity to do something yourself without help? Or to launch into an adventure? If you never had those experiences, it might be that insecure attachment patterns in your family kept you from them and now your knee-jerk reaction is to do the same with your child.

Release any personalization of our child's choices. When we take it personally that our children are developing independence, it muddies the waters between them and us. The truth is that our children are *supposed* to grow up and out. It is truly *not about us.* Unless we make it so.

Reimagine the ways that we can act as a safe haven and secure base for our child. When they change capacity or interest in launching out more, we need to change our job descriptions. From the beginning to the end, it is truly a whiplash-inducing process of change.

The job description of a parent of a teen is to listen with care and concern as your former baby but now young adult processes their life and relationships, but not to give too much guidance. And frankly, keep your opinions to yourself unless specifically asked! Seriously, though, there is so much nuance

in our growing relationships to our children as teens. But we do need to accept and understand that our role gradually changes over time. The more maturing we are able to have around that reality, the less unnecessary hurt will exist in the process.

My hope is that we all can understand the importance of loosening our grip on our children as they age and understanding that, for them, remaining forever in our hands is stifling and unnatural, but that does not mean that we can't stay forever in their hearts and be connected in deeply meaningful and sacred ways.

WHEN NUDGING IS NECESSARY

Sometimes we are ready for our children to gain independence before they are ready to do so. This is also hard. We might look forward to a new independent phase for our child/teen only to find ourselves face-to-face with them clinging and desperately pleading not to have to take space from us.

Different from the Lennie impulse to *clamp down on our children's independence,* but equally problematic, is the instinct to *push* them into independence.

I had a friend growing up who was deathly afraid of swimming. She watched the movie *Jaws* as a seven-year-old (oops!) and decided that submerging her body into any body of water was a life-threatening choice.

One day, I went to the pool with her family. After much nudging and prodding from me and her parents, she stood her ground and refused to get in the pool and instead sat on a lawn chair while I swam with her siblings and parents. I excitedly invited her to come swim and tried to reassure her as her friend that it was safe. "Come in and swim with us! Let's play Marco Polo!"

Instead of meeting my enthusiasm, she crumpled up into more of a ball and stared at the ground. Her father was watching her response, and I imagine it triggered both fear and shame for him. Fear that she would never get comfortable with water and may even lose friends over it, and shame that his daughter was well beyond the typical age that children usually feel comfortable playing in pools.

After I gave up asking her to come swim, I noticed him start to swim across the pool with a big smile on his face. He then got out of the pool and ran toward my friend and picked up her flailing body even as she attempted to fight him to get down. He was trying to make it playful and fun, but I could also feel frustration in him as he did this. He then hustled to the side of the pool and flung her terrified body into the water.

I remember swearing, "Oh shitcakes," inside my head as I recognized the look of abject horror across her face before she hit the water.

When she surfaced, she was sobbing and ingesting alarming amounts of chlorinated water as she doggie-paddled furiously to the side of the pool to get out.

Not only did her father's attempt to push her toward her fears not work, but it backfired.

She was still not willing to get in a body of water to swim, and now she was no longer willing to even go near a pool or a lake or an ocean.

It makes sense, right? If we are afraid of something and someone pushes us toward it without our consent, we are contending with more than just fear of the thing. We are now contending with the added fear of someone we love pushing us toward the thing.

"No pushing or shoving" is on our body safety rules sheet for my children. It is also on my parental emotional safety rules sheet I keep in my head for myself. Pushing our children

rarely results in the kind of independence we are hoping for. Instead, it leads children to feel violated by us, and it breaks trust in the safe haven portion of our secure connection.

My friend needed help processing her fear feelings so she could get herself in the water.

Scripts: Ways to Help When There Is Resistance to Appropriate Levels of Increasing Independence

Let's say our child is panicking about going to science camp in the sixth grade. They are all packed up, and we are in the parking lot dropping them off for the bus, but they are clinging to us and begging us not to go.

Acknowledge the feelings first. Sometimes that is all they need us to do. To simply help them regulate their emotional response. When we take the time to genuinely respond to the things they are feeling about independence, it helps them sense that their concerns are being addressed.

"You are feeling really anxious about leaving me for these two days. Is that right?"

"I can see how shaky your body feels right now."

"It is so hard to be filled with those panicky and clingy feelings. Come here and let me hold you while they work through your body."

"Are there specific things that you are worried about? Relationships or events about this weekend?"

Rule out any significant stressors. Sometimes our children don't want to do something because they are facing something terrible. Things like bullying and abuse require adult intervention and can be appropriate reasons to allow our children to refrain from an activity. If there is an issue at hand that is traumatic or deeply distressing, we want our children to know that we will help keep them safe.

“Is there anything unsafe happening with your friends or teachers that is driving this strong desire not to go?”

Co-regulate ongoing emotions. If you have ruled out any possible high-stress situation, but they are still feeling clingy and begging to stay home, instead of getting caught up in the decision discussion, focus on helping them regulate their body state. Let your kid or teen know: “I got you, I’m not going to push you into something you are not ready to handle, let’s first reconnect and help you feel calm and safe.” We’re not making any decisions right now, we’re just focusing on helping you process these feelings. This might take some time, depending on how significant the task at hand.

“I’m here.”

“I got you.”

“Let it out.”

Identify soothing or reassuring variables. Once your child/teen’s emotional state has reset into a more regulated state, then we can help them to recognize comforting coping-related resources and skills.

“I noticed Ms. Linda is going on the trip. Would it help to be able to ride next to her on the bus? She’s been so comforting in the past when you’ve felt anxious at school.”

“I can ask the principal if you can use her phone to call me when you get there to see how you are feeling then? Sometimes just getting there and seeing the fun and activities involved can make it feel less overwhelming.”

Let them borrow our confidence: We can simultaneously acknowledge their lack of confidence and offer them ours. This is only effective when we have first acknowledged their feelings, then co-regulated them, then offered soothing. *Then* we can gently nudge them forward with confidence.

“I can see that you are still feeling uncertain about whether you can handle this big trip, but I am truly confident that once you get integrated into the cabins and the science fun, you will feel far more calm and comfortable.”

“You’ve got this, kid, but if something else happens and you need my help, I am a phone call away, and I will absolutely do whatever I can to help. But my best guess is that I won’t hear much from you at all because you will be knee deep in scientific research, which I know really gets your gourd!”

If, for some reason, our child truly cannot come down from that panicky state and/or escalates as time goes on, it just might be that they are truly not ready. It might mean that we need to cancel our work for the next day and go with them. It might mean that they miss the class trip and have to process the FOMO and potential shame they feel about that later. The key is not to catastrophize the situation.

“Sometimes we are just too flooded with emotions to go on an adventure. That’s okay, life is full of adventures and you will have plenty more opportunities to go on one.”

When our children are fleeing to our safe haven at a time when we wish they were launching from our secure base, our calm and caring response will help them get the love they need to be ready when the timing is right.

The dance between the shelter of our arms and the excitement of their adventures out into the world is not a linear dance. Sometimes we think, “They aren’t ready,” and they are chomping at the bit; other times we think, “They are ready,” and they are glued to our sides instead. Our job is not to hold tight or to push loose; it is to stay steady. To offer connection and care, guidance and tools, and a secure parent who can handle both flinging and clinging with compassion and calm reassurance.

MOM, YOU'RE EMBARRASSING ME

If you have made it this far, you have likely already deduced that, in terms of personality, I am someone who can be categorized as a bit "extra." I came out of my mother's womb looking for accessories, party clothes, and any opportunity to participate in some form of theater or social movement. As a mother, I have become no less extra. If anything, my accessories and my dedication to social causes have only grown.

If I am in Starbucks and Shakira starts playing on the loudspeakers, you bet your bottom dollar I will be shakin' my hips and singing in my best Shakira voice. My three-year-olds are *all in* for these shenanigans. They dance, they sing off-key with me, and they delight in the chance to enjoy our lives as we wait for our hot apple ciders.

My almost nine-year-old son used to be down for my goof-fest. Now? Not as much.

A few months ago, the two of us were walking down to our mailbox one afternoon when my son said, "Do you think that my new best friend necklace will be in the mailbox?" And since my brain affiliates *all words* into songs, I started belting out: "In the mailbox, the mighty mailbox, the necklace sleeps toooooonight" to the tune of The Tokens' "The Lion Sleeps Tonight."

Before I tell you my son's reaction, I want you to know three things. 1) I was under no delusion that what I was doing would be considered cool. 2) I cannot in any way, shape, or form hit the high notes in this particular song. 3) In years past, this moment would have become an impromptu sidewalk karaoke with my son, where we took turns making up funny verses of the original tune.

But alas, times are a changin'.

My son stopped dead in his tracks, looked me square in the eyes, and simply said:

"Bro, just no. Just no, bro."

Bro? I knew I had been shifted from "Mama" to "Mom" and, occasionally, when I was really annoying, "Mother." But "bro"? I never saw that one coming.

I recognize that this experience can be interpreted in many ways. I could easily view it as disrespectful. Or distancing. But neither of those interpretations will help me and my son navigate his increasing autonomy. Instead, I interpret this as *practice.*

My son is growing in his independence. His identity is forming in beautiful ways both inside our family and in the outside world. He is not launching away from his relationship with me or his need for me (he isn't even nine yet!), but he is growing in his capacity to experience independence from me as well as increased connection with others. He goes to school each day, and in that space, he functions without my physical presence.

The independence he experiences away from me at school gives him an opportunity to develop different ways of talking and identifying himself. At this particular stage of development, he is a bro. Which means that so are his friends, his sisters, and his parents. What is a "bro," you ask? Anyone he is talking to. What does he think "bro" means? It's the same thing I thought "dude" meant when I was around his age and beginning to practice independence.

He is not really calling me "bro" because of how he sees me; it's more about how he is trying to see himself in relation to me. Does he still need me? Of course. Does he need me in the same way he needed me when he was two? Nope. Not at that frequency anyway.

Later that same day, he fell and skinned his knee while riding his bike. He ran crying into my arms for support and my incredible first-responder kit. (I have great Band-Aids.) He did not call me "bro" during that moment; instead, I was "Mom." He is very much still in a stage of life where I function as his primary attachment figure, and he both wants and needs me in tender or distressing moments. But, he is in a different place mentally and relationally than he was even last year. His brain and mind and body are all maturing.

I can handle him calling me "bro" and telling me that I am embarrassing during my "extra" antics, because I know that I am not, in fact, his bro, and that *I* like my funny, weird songs, so it's okay if he doesn't.

Instead, through the lens of understanding how children and teens "practice" their next stages of development, I felt endeared to be given an honorary bro title. Plus, my son felt confident that he could give me social feedback. He knew I would hear him and did not anticipate a battle over a boundary he was putting down. I just giggled and playfully said, "What? Me singing at the top of my lungs off-key is not a good look for you?"

He grabbed my arm and said, "Let's just walk and talk, okay?"

It is not only our job to respond calmly and with understanding when our children are tender and reaching for us, but also to hold tight and not mock or scold them as they try out various degrees of independence in relation to us. If I had said, "That is inappropriate, I am your mother and you will refer to me with respect," I would have made it personal, which would have made it harder for him to be his authentic self with me moving forward.

Does this mean that I will stop singing and dancing my way through life? Definitely not. But it means that I will hold

some increased awareness of the contexts I am in with my son and the vulnerability he feels about them. In this particular situation, we were in our neighborhood and he felt sure that someone we knew might walk or drive by at any moment and bear witness to my one-woman musical and then immediately associate him with my dorkiness and spread the word to all his friends.

Even though our children's growing independence can lead them to feel differently about things we do, or things they want to do with us, that is not rejection. They are simply exploring the world through different lenses than they had before. The more calm and less reactive we are to their changing lenses, the less likely they will be to stay set in those lenses forever.

MATURING TAKES PRACTICE

When kids are starting to reach toward new developmental stages, it can be awkward to watch. They try on new language, new styles, and even new friend groups. They start looking for any data on how to act and be a little bit older. This is not always smooth or in line with how we imagined them maturing and developing.

I am particularly reminded of the time in sixth grade when my cute and slightly older neighbor asked me to play basketball with him. I accepted his offer, and then I immediately thought it would be a good idea to quickly head upstairs and stuff a pair of socks into each side of my training bra to accentuate my girlish figure. We played a few rounds of the game of HORSE, and I had won two out of three. I was feeling pret-ttt-y good about myself during game four until we got to the letter *O* and he looked down at the ground in confusion and asked, "Where did these socks just come from?" We both immediately recognized the lopsided situation on my chest, and I said something like, "That's weird, they

must be my brothers," and then ran off saying that I forgot I had homework to do and proceeded to hide under my covers for the next four to six weeks. Let's just say, we never played HORSE together again after that.

Which is why it is important for us to remember that maturing is a process, not a goal. I never told anyone about what happened because I was mortified, but if I had, what I would have needed to hear was that it was normal to want to mature and to try things out to see what they feel like.

Maturation happens over time, and with many seemingly immature choices along the way. Why? Because part of human development is figuring out "who we are," which means trying out different versions of ourselves. Sometimes those versions have attitudes.

When our children try to "act older than they are," it is because they are practicing for the next stage. They are aware of the leap they are about to make via their slightly older peers, siblings, or characters in shows.

This is natural. Development is a windy road, not a straight path forward. When we are able to stay calm and centered in our responses to the windiness, it allows our children to have their own reaction to it instead of digging their heels in deeper to prove a point to us.

While we, of course, will need to step in at times to redirect choices that are potentially harmful to ourself or others, it is also important not to overreact to the awkward choices. Our children need us to have an understanding of the dignified *why* behind the *what.* For example:

"I can understand that it doesn't feel cool to wear your helmet anymore when many of the neighborhood girls are leaving theirs off, but that is not a bendable rule in our family. Why? Because your head is not bendable."

"I see you are wearing a bit more black these days. What does wearing more of it feel like for you or mean to you?"

"You're not signing up for the chess club this year? I am so curious about how you made that decision since it has been such a place of joy for you in the past."

"I've noticed you've been spending way more time with Jon S. instead of Jon P. lately, curious about that shift and how it is feeling for you?"

When we take a kind and curious approach to the changes our children are exploring, it opens up the door for them to do their own self-reflection. If we push and pressure our children to move in particular directions, it tends to backfire and put them on the defensive. A respectful and curious approach wins hearts and gives children the time to use *their* minds to truly consider the ramifications of their decisions.

MILESTONES AND MILES OF FEELS

Most kids experience milestones as positive markers in their growing-up process. But as parents watching our children cross those milestones? I think we should change the term to "mile*feels*." Processing our children turning big corners into new life stages of their lives is truly a heart-boggling experience.

Even though our children are daily growing and changing from the time they exit the womb, milestones are different because they involve rapid shifts in both their lives and ours. Things like eating solid foods, starting preschool, learning to ride a bike, having their first sweetheart, graduating from high school, getting married, etc. These particular moments in time are hugely meaningful to them and to us. Exactly what type of meaning we are making out of them, however, can affect whether or not our children feel supported by us or stressed out by us.

When our children hit milestones, they and we are likely to feel some tender feelings. That is a good thing as long as those feelings truly belong to the moment. It is positive for us to share our sweet tears of celebration, pride, and appreciation for the time that has passed, for example:

"I'm so proud of you!"

"This is such an incredible accomplishment."

"It's truly such a beautiful gift to watch you grow up."

If, on the other hand, the tears are full of fear or catastrophic thoughts, we need to edit them so that our kids don't have to process our pain about their growth.

INSTEAD OF: "Now you're not my baby anymore, I can't believe you're leaving me."

TRY: "It's been such an honor watching you grow up from the little baby in my arms to this incredibly capable and mature dude before my eyes."

INSTEAD OF: "Now, don't go thinking you can just do whatever you want now that you have a car, the world is a dangerous place."

TRY: "Congratulations! Having a driver's license is major! I'm so glad we agreed on all the expectations for driving well in advance so now you can just go out and have fun. (Also, keep your tracker on so I know where to find you if you need help)."

INSTEAD OF: "I guess now that you have a girlfriend/boyfriend/sweetheart, you don't need your dear ol' mom/dad/parent anymore."

TRY: "It's so exciting that you've met someone special! I want you to know that we're still always here for you even as you do more adult things, but we're also pumped for more people to get to know you as well as we do, you're such a gift!"

> **PARENTING PERSPECTIVE**
>
> **Let Children Have Their Childhood**
>
> As a divorce and coparenting specialist, I see too many children privy to an abundance of adult problems, resulting in parentification and a whole lot of anxiety. The best thing a divorcing parent can do to ensure their child can remain as secure as possible is to avoid involving them in adult conversations. Children should not have to recover from their childhoods simply because their parents could not separate their emotions from the best interests of their kiddos.
>
> — MICHELLE DEMPSEY-MULTACK, creator of Moms Moving On, parent of two

The pain we feel when our children launch into greater levels of independence deserves to be understood and cared for, but not by our children. By other adults in our life who have gone through it or are going through it with us. That grief is ours, not our children's.

Key things to remember when our children are passing new milestones:

- It is not about us. We might be mind-blown that our "little gal or guy" is graduating eighth grade and full of memories of what it was like when they still wanted to sit in our lap and wrap their arms around their neck, but they are more likely thinking about how they look in their graduation gown and whether or not they are going to be cool at high school. Our job is to be attuned to where they are at and how they are feeling about the change.
- We can make it special. The ways we celebrate our children in their milestones can be deeply impactful on their sense of self. Writing them letters full of pride and

adoration that truly detail the challenges they have overcome to get there and the unique ways they rose to the occasion. Making their favorite food, or taking them somewhere special. Taking the time to truly acknowledge the momentous event at hand.

- We deserve processing time. These milestones affect us significantly. As our children's lives change, so do ours. Taking the time to meet with our peers—friends, partners, therapists, etc.—to grieve and process what it is like for us is an important thing to do. It helps us to reorient to the new season with a full heart and lots of support behind us.

Though milestones mean changes in the ways that our relationship with our children might operate day to day, we are always still their parents. Plus, there will always be more milestones. More markers we cross together both in their lives and in ours. As we grieve what is past, may we also always look forward to what lies ahead.

LETTING OUR CHILDREN FAIL

It can be really painful to flop and fail and mess up. That's true when the flubbing is our own, and it can feel exponentially true when the flubbing belongs to our children. Standing by while our children make mistakes or get lost on their path is *not a fun time.* But it is a time that all parents go through in increasing increments as our children start to take on more responsibility in and outside of our homes.

I wish I could tell us all that if we offer our children a secure attachment experience, they will go out in the world and never fail, flop, or make dumb choices. Wouldn't that be fantastic? Alas, it's not the case. Life is too complex for that sort of storyline.

The good news is that we *can* offer them a secure relationship where they can authentically process mistakes and

move forward from them with resilience instead of shame. What does that require of us?

We Have to Know How to Accept Our Own Failures and Flubs

Our children (especially our tweens and teens) need us to model self-compassion in the face of mistakes. They are watching for a model of what a "grown-up" does in the face of failure. If we respond to our mistakes with harsh self-beratement, we are teaching them that mistakes are dire. If, instead, we find a way to be gentle and understanding of ourselves in our mistakes, it will give them a path to do the same.

We Have to Model Taking Accountability for Our Impact on Others

When we make mistakes, we also need to model for our children what true accountability looks like. If we excuse our mistakes and always put ourselves into the "right" in all situations, always justifying what we chose or did, our children will learn the same. Instead, we need to model the strength and courage it takes to acknowledge when we have done something that hurt someone else (even if we didn't mean to).

We Have to Stay Attuned to What Our Children Are Feeling in a Moment of Failure

Sometimes our children will fail and not feel much. A kind of "meh" response to the consequence. They don't feel worried, and we need to be careful not to try to infect them with ours. We can make sure they understand the implications of not turning in their homework, but their learning process does not belong to us, it belongs to them.

Other times, they may feel overwhelming shame or terror about the mistake. Our job is to help them process those emotions and gently offer insight and perspective without pushing them to feel or think in a particular way. It is more about being there for them than it is about doing it for them. If we manage and fix, they don't get the repetition in to see that they are capable of handling these uncomfortable moments of life.

NERD ALERT: Attachment Hierarchy

When our children are in infancy/toddlerhood, they have a primal instinct to have a high preference for their primary caregiver. What that means is that, at any given point in time, they have a clear idea of who in the room is their #1 when it comes to attachment.

This helps young children to run quickly if/when danger or distress enters the room. If young children had no hierarchy with attachment figures, they would get lost in a decision-making process ("Who should I choose?"), which could compromise their ability to get safe fast.

Though children can seem to be "only" attached to their primary caregiver because of their strong preference for them, they are usually attached to more than one person. And when the #1 is at work, the #2 becomes number #1 until they return, and so on and so forth down the line. Which is why some grandparents really don't like when a primary caregiver is in the room because the child is far more engaged with them when he/she is out of the room.

But as children age into later childhood and adolescence, the intensity of their hierarchy shifts. There become nuances of who they go to when, and what topics they utilize different attachment figures for.

This is a good thing. It means they are learning how to effectively utilize different relationships and therefore have more support to draw upon when feeling tender or distressed.

As time progresses and our children/teens age, something else happens to the hierarchy. The primary attached figure gets dethroned. The first primary attachment figure, usually a parent, is passed up for the position by a significant peer or partner.

Attachment transfer is nature's way of continuing our species. If our children continued to prioritize their primary attachment to us, it would be much harder for them to create the romantic bonds generally involved in procreation. →

Does it hurt when we are removed from positions #1 or #2 and put behind our adolescents' immature friends or sweethearts? Yes, yes, it does. Have they stopped being attached to us? No, no, they have not.

Attachment transfer means that our children transfer us as the primary go-to in times of distress, but it does not mean that they are no longer attached to us.

In fact, when we can ride those waves of change with serenity, it allows our bonds to deepen with our children. By understanding that shift, they feel our attunement to their growth process and

> can continue to trust in us as a source of effective support in their lives.

Failing and flailing are all a part of the gig of humanness. If we can calmly accept that and respond with empathy and calm presence when our children go through it, it can be a moment of discovery, learning, and bonding for both of us.

THE OTHERS

What an incredibly sacred gift it is to get to be our children's attachment figures.

To hold their tiny bodies on our chest when they are infants. To play chase with them while absorbing the high-pitched squeals of joy and laughter. To be the person they run to and call for when they are in the midst of something big. To be a safe haven for their pain and a secure base for their adventuring. To be the first or second person they tell when exciting things happen in their lives.

It is truly an honor.

Which is why it can feel entirely confusing and even crushing when that honor slowly gets transferred to Sam from gym class.

The chances that Sam from gym class remains as our child's long-term chosen primary attachment figure are low. I give him three weeks before he shows enough of his adolescent true colors to rain on the attachment parade. But the chances that *someone other than us* will ultimately take on the primary attachment figure role in the long term of our children's lives? Very high.

Very high. Inevitable.

If we can accept that and celebrate our child's capacity to give and receive that level of connection to other people in

their life, we free them (and us) from the pain of feeling threatened or in competition with those people.

Future Note to Self: This acceptance will be especially important in the event that we ever take on the role of becoming someone's parent-in-law. It's far more likely that we can build a positive relationship with our children's chosen people if we are not consciously or unconsciously vying to get back into that #1 position again. Instead, we can see our new important role as a supporter of their relationship, which helps remove us from a list of stressors that every partnership has to navigate already.

When our children transfer their primary attachment relationships to other people, it is our job to see it as an accomplishment on their part and not a failure of ours or our relationships with them. Bonding onward is a healthy part of development.

LOVING FORWARD

Our children are perpetually moving forward from us. Notice I did not say "moving on." No one "moves on" from their attachment to their parents. Even when parents pass away, or when it becomes necessary for an adult child to cut off contact, the grief of that relationship lives on. The parent-child relationship is truly the most primal and foundational bond of our developmental process. Which is why I am so proud of all of us for dedicating ourselves to the work necessary to give our children the benefit of securely attached relationships with us.

Whether we have a taby (not a baby anymore but not quite a toddler) who is learning to toddle away from our arms inches at a time, or a high schooler who veers away from our embrace out of embarrassment in front of their peers, our job is to help *love our children forward* without misunderstanding their moves or taking them personally.

The act of parenting never ends, but it sure as heck evolves and changes. While it is not possible to have control over our children or their destiny when they are 3 weeks old or 2,190 weeks old (Did I just estimate my age in weeks? Sure did), it is possible to be consistently dedicated to cultivating an attuned, supportive relationship with them.

As you go on your merry way forward, I want to leave you with some wishes for your relationship with your children.

- May your children know that your arms are a safe haven for their tender needs and distressing moments.
- May you know the gift of them melting into your embrace.
- May your children know the pure delight that enters your body when they enter the room.
- May you know the incredible trust that comes from a child who feels cherished by you.
- May your children know the safety of a parent who can look at the dignified *why* behind their less dignified reactions.
- May your children know the incredible bonds that come with parents who are willing to enter the silliness of play.
- May you know the pure joy of being consumed with contagious and healing laughter with your children.
- May your children know the treasure of having parents who believe in their worthiness outside of their achievements.
- May you know the calm that comes with steadily offering our children love and affection no matter how they are performing for us or others in the world.
- May you and your children have countless open and connected conversations about the complexities of the world that we are all trying to navigate.

- May your children be people who know how to initiate repair after a rupture.
- May your children know what it feels like to be securely attached to you, and, in return, you with them.

Love on.

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Notes

Introduction

"The term 'attachment parenting' was coined by Dr. William Sears, a pediatrician who created a parenting philosophy that is loosely based on attachment ideas." William Sears and Martha Sears, *The Attachment Parenting Book: A Commonsense Guide to Understanding and Nurturing Your Baby* (New York: Little Brown, 2001).

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Chapter 1

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PHOTO BY JOHN MILLER

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Herd to find people to lean on. (If you can't afford it, email hello@attachmentnerd.com for a scholarship. Because, truly, every parent on earth needs and deserves a supportive village.)



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