

Connection

A mother recently told me her four-year-old was making life miserable. "What's wrong with my daughter?" she asked me. Then came the list: the whining, the meltdowns, the clinginess, the flat refusal to get dressed, get in the car, or get in the bath.

We worry about our relationships a lot.

Why? Relationships are at the heart of our wellbeing. When relationships feel good, we tend to feel good. But when a relationship is rocky, we tend to feel rocky. And nothing feels rockier than a home held hostage by a four-year-old.

Rather than discuss her list of concerns, I asked how much connection was in their relationship. She seemed puzzled.

"We're together *all day*," she responded.

I stopped her. "That's not what I asked. Being together isn't the same as being connected. When you're with her, what's actually happening between you?"

She stared at me, considered her response, and then said, "Honestly? I'm managing her. Getting her dressed, fed, into the car, out of the car, into the bath, into bed." Then, in a moment of candour and insight, she added, "It's instructions all day. I can't remember the last time we just... enjoyed each other."

When things are not going well, going back to basics is usually my first step. And there's nothing more basic than focusing on connection.

What is Connection?

Connection is feeling seen, heard, valued, and accepted. Even a two-year-old knows when she has it — and when she doesn't. I explained this to the mum I was speaking with and asked, "How connected does your daughter feel when she's with you?"

Using her fingers, she considered each element. "Seen. I watch her all day, but mostly I'm watching for trouble." She paused. "Heard. She talks non-stop and I've honestly stopped listening. It's background noise." She grimaced. I reminded her of the last two: valued and accepted. She was quiet. Then, "I guess I can probably work on connection with my daughter a bit."

In our relationships with little ones, we load up on correction and direction. Connection receives short shrift. Just like dollars are the currency of our economy, connection is the currency of our relationships. And when small children don't feel seen, heard, valued, and accepted, they chase it — with whining, meltdowns, and clinginess. Much of what we call "challenging behaviour" is really a connection request, badly worded.

A Connection Audit

If things have gone a little wonky at your place, try three simple questions:

When have my connections been strong? What helped my child feel seen, heard, valued, and accepted?

What's getting in the way of good connection that's in my control?

What's one thing I can work on this week to build better connection?

The Core Connection Builder

The best way to build connection with a child under five is gloriously simple: get on the floor. Ten minutes, phone in another room, letting them lead the play. No teaching, no correcting, no agenda. To a child, love is spelled T-I-M-E — and for littlies, it's floor time.

The mum I spoke with tried it that evening. Ten minutes of tea parties, her daughter directing proceedings, mum simply delighting in her. She kept it up daily and emailed me a couple of weeks later.

The whining? Reduced. The meltdowns? Fewer, and shorter. The clinginess eased, because her daughter finally felt full. The challenges stopped dominating the relationship.

Connection — feeling seen, heard, valued, and accepted — can be tricky. Life with small children is exhausting. But it's the foundation of better relationships and happier homes.



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