

Basic Information:

The most vital step to helping your child manage their behavior appropriately is based in a solid connection with their parent/caregiver. All of the work a therapist will do with your child/family builds on this foundation. Close, connected relationships do not come easy for some people. The cause of this is very individual and could be the result of in utero stress, early medical intervention, parental issues (depression, anxiety, substance use or life experiences), sensory sensitivities or a wide variety of other challenges. When you intentionally connect with your child, you show your child they are precious and valued as they are and you meet a basic human need for acceptance and belonging. When a child is finally able to feel valued by you, only then can they start to experience felt safety within this trusting relationship.



Parent/Caregiver Tips:

As with anything else we want to be good at, we need to practice for these skills to come easily. Schedule and prioritize 10 minutes per day of Connecting Time with your child.

- This time needs to be child driven, meaning that your child gets to select an activity based on their interests. You can provide them with options but they get to be the final decision maker. This provides them with the sense of control and autonomy needed to feel safe.
- Choose a space and time where you are unlikely to be disturbed and take steps to make sure this happens (mute your phone, close the door, schedule during a younger sibling's naptime).
- Be consistent. If you say you are going to have Connect Time, do it. If it absolutely has to be rescheduled, explain this to the child and set up another time quickly. This is something they will count on and they need to be able to trust it will happen.
- Be mindful of what you are bringing to the interaction. Check in with yourself and get yourself emotionally regulated first. Take a quick walk, have a snack, drink some water or take some deep breaths. Your child will mirror your regulation so be careful about what you are showing them. This also means that you need to let go of any frustrations you have toward your child. This is a time to connect with the core of who your precious child is not to focus on how irritated you were at them this morning. Remember, they are not their behavior. Do not cancel Connect Time because of a behavior issue.
- Build a ritual that can help you and your child transition into your Connect Time. This could be a special handshake or a silly dance you do together. The specifics of what you choose isn't all that important. It is the idea that it is something fun and consistent that you do together. I often start my sessions with kids using what I call "Hands and Eyes". It goes something like this:

Adult (with a smile): "Joe, please let me see your eyes and hands."

Child: Makes eye contact and places hands on adult's hands.

Adult (with a smile): "Thank you for giving me your eyes and hands. It is time for our Connect time. I am so excited to play with you."

This process is a quick way to get your child's full attention and help them feel comfortably seen by you. It is important to remember not to force eye contact if it's uncomfortable for your child or yourself. The only kind of healthy eye contact is that that is freely given.

- Pay attention to your voice quality during Connect Time. Is your tone of voice harsh or playful? Are your words rushed or soothing? Are you loud or soft?
- This is a time to follow your child's lead. Be playful and silly. This is not a time to teach or correct. Try to avoid questions as this can increase feelings of anxiety about getting the right answer.
- Match what they are doing. Copying their actions sends the message that what they are doing is something worth doing. For example: When they lay on the floor, you lay on the floor. If they use an orange crayon to draw a flower, you use an orange crayon to draw a flower. If they build a stack of blocks, you build a stack of blocks. When they say, "I'm going to find the train", you casually say, "You are looking for the train!" This shows your child that you are listening and gives them a sense of importance.
- Use specific labeled praise. Think ahead of time about two or three character traits you want to encourage in your child. Find opportunities to praise your child by noticing when they've done something and pairing it with the character trait you want to see. For example, I might say something like, "You are being so careful with the blocks. That tells me you are responsible!" or "You took some time to choose that toy. That means you are thoughtful!"
- Take every opportunity to provide your child with safe touch. The hands and eyes ritual described above starts off with touch and you can incorporate more healthy touch in through high fives, knuckles, hugs, a pat on the shoulder or a hand on the back.
- Suggested Activities for Connect Time can include legos, art, puzzles, outdoor activities, playdough, board games, scavenger hunts, hiking, fishing, visiting a park, having a picnic, dance party or baking. Try picking three that are possibilities and letting your child choose from those options.
- When Connect Time is over let them know how much you enjoyed playing with them. They need to see and feel your adoration so be mindful of your facial expression. Some kids will feel upset when Connect Time is over. Empathize with them and let them know that you can't wait to play with them again and remind them of the next opportunity. It can be helpful to use a timer to signify that time is up.

Next Steps:

If you start to notice that you or your child is struggling with connection, it may be helpful to contact your pediatrician, a local therapist or school counselor. Any and all of these professionals may be a source of support.

Additional Resources:

- [The Connected Parent by Purvis and Qualls](#)
- [The Whole Brain Child by Siegel](#)
- [Beyond Behaviors by Delahooke](#)