

What 40 Years of Research Says Kids Actually Need

By Dr Justin Coulson

We all have those nights...

We're running late, dinner is burning, the phone is ringing, and at least one child is dramatically upset. As we push through the frantic chaotic stressful moments, we become aware of our youngest child, vying for some attention amid the stress.

"I know you want me. I'll be right there", we say as we race past our little one time and again.

"Just let me take care of this and I'll be with you."

"I hear you... I'm coming in just a minute."

Finally, in a burst of exasperation these words cut through the noise and endless to-do list;

"Mummy (or Daddy)... I *NEED* you!"

The Job That Never Clocks Off

Sometimes it would be nice to not be so needed. If only we could stop being a parent at 8pm (or 6pm!). Life would be so much simpler if we could clock off for the day, like an employee. But parenting doesn't work like that. It's an on-call 24-hour a day, non-stop role. The ongoing, always-at-the-ready, nature of being a parent makes it extremely challenging to always be there for our children – to always be emotionally available.

But that is precisely what they need – a parent who is emotionally available. And it is *the single most important thing we can be* to create a happy, peaceful home, and a happy, secure child.

What 40 Years of Research Tells Us

In 1955, a research team led by Emmy Werner began a research study into resilience. She and her team followed 698 children born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai for forty years. This has become one of the longest running and most-cited developmental studies in the world.

For kids to be resilient, there are a handful of "protective factors" that impact their ability to thrive despite hard times. The linchpin? In Werner's words, "We noted the importance of a caregiver's sensitivity and responsiveness to the [child's] needs that led to a foundation of trust, a basic ingredient in the process of [resilience] in adulthood."

At the core of a child's ongoing thriving is... you.

This idea of being sensitive and responsive is sometimes called being "emotionally available". So how's that looking at your place right now as you juggle emails, cost-of-living stress, increased workload, relationships, washing, cooking, buying a birthday gift for the kid you don't know who has invited your child to a party this weekend, and *everything else*?

Parents who are emotionally available make a conscious decision to be mindful. They are aware of their children's needs and respond attentively. When a child comes to them with a request, or with a need, an emotionally available parent listens to her children's request. The parent does not

necessarily indulge her child, give in, or be at the child's beck and call. Instead, the parent attempts to comprehend their children's emotional state, and respond in a deliberate and careful manner.

What Emotionally Available Parenting Looks Like to a Child

Children who experience emotionally available parents agree to statements like these:

My parents support me
My parents console me when I am upset
My parents show they care about me
My parents show a genuine interest in me
My parents remember things that are important to me
My parents are available to talk at any time
My parents ask questions in a caring manner
My parents spend extra time with me just because they want to
My parents are willing to talk about my troubles
My parents talk with me about my interests
My parents value my input
My parents make me feel wanted

Take a moment and pretend that you are your child. Would *you* agree with those statements about you? Would your children agree with those statements? (Maybe you can ask them... but be ready. The answers might challenge you.)

Now think of a time when you were able to respond in such a way for your child. How do you know your child sensed your availability? What words did you use? What body language made your child feel safe and heard? How did it make your child feel about the thing that was troubling him or her? How did your child respond to you?

Being emotionally available is not a new problem. In the 1800s Mark Twain said:

"We are always too busy for children; we never give them the time or interest they deserve. We lavish gifts upon them; but the most precious gift – our personal association, which means so much to them – we give grudgingly."

What's actually happened is we've found more sophisticated ways to be distracted.

The principle of emotional availability is arguably one of the simplest things we can do for our children. We don't need a course, a technique, or a perfect response. We just need to be there — fully, unhurriedly, genuinely there.

Your child isn't asking you to be perfect. They're asking you to show up. And on the nights when dinner burns and the phone rings and everything is loud and demanding, the small voice cutting through the noise is worth stopping for.

"Mummy, I need you."

They do. And you're enough.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. Justin travels all around the country, speaking at schools to students, educators and parents about wellbeing and relationships. He is also the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. Justin has written 10 books about families and parenting - with the latest about raising boys out this year! For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.