

Connection

A father recently told me his relationship with his twelve-year-old son was fragile and becoming fragmented. “What’s wrong with my son?” he asked me. He then began to list his son’s shortcomings and challenges.

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.

Rather than discuss this father’s list of concerns about his son, I asked how much *connection* was in their relationship. He seemed puzzled.

“We talk all the time”, he responded. Then he proceeded to talk about his son’s “problems”.

I stopped him. “That’s not what I asked. I want to know about your connection, not his challenging behaviours. When you talk, what are you talking with him about? How involved is he in the conversation? What level of connection is in the discussion?”

He stared at me, considered his response, and then said, “He just grunts. It’s usually me talking at him.” Then, in a moment of candour and insight, he added, “And it’s mostly me telling him what to do or what I think is wrong with him.”

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. I explained this to the Dad I was speaking to and asked, “How connected does your son feel when he’s with you?”

Using his fingers, he considered each of those four elements. “Seen. I try to see him, but I don’t really stand in his shoes. It’s my agenda.” He paused. “Heard. Well, he doesn’t say anything.” He grimaced as he said it before adding, “I’m not really asking him questions that he cares about answering though. We have pretty lousy conversations.”

I reminded him of the last two: valued and accepted. He was quiet. Then, “I guess I can probably work on connection with my son a bit.”

In our relationships, 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, research consistently points out that when children, students, staff, and even spouses don’t feel seen, heard, valued, and accepted, they turn to... less desirable behaviours.

A Connection Audit

If relationships have gone a little wonky at your home, workplace, or classroom, I recommend a brief review. Here are three simple questions to ask:

1. When have my connections been strong? What has happened to help people around me feel seen, heard, valued, and accepted?
2. What's getting in the way of good connection that's in my control?
3. What is one thing I can work on this week that will help me build better connection and help those around me feel seen, heard, valued, and accepted?

The Core Connection Builder

The best way we can build better connection is to spend better time together. Involvement is the key word here. To a child, love is spelled T-I-M-E. It's how we build relationships, whether with our children, or even with students, staff, colleagues - even your mother-in-law.

The Dad I spoke with was a little annoyed that I wasn't telling him how to fix his son. But on his drive home, he decided to try what I'd suggested. When he arrived home, he hugged his son (who wasn't sure what was going on), apologised for being grumpy and on his case lately, and they shared a late night ice-cream together.

A few weeks later he emailed me to report. Following their chat, they made plans to go for a weekend camping trip, ride mountain bikes, and eat pizza the following weekend. The man's son had rated their weekend away a stunning success. The man himself? He told me that he saw, heard, valued, and accepted his son more in that brief time than he had in the past two years combined.

And the result?

His son no longer seemed to be quite so difficult. The challenges... mostly disappeared. They certainly stopped dominating the relationship.

Connection - feeling seen, heard, valued, and accepted - can be tricky. Life is challenging. But it's the foundation of better relationships and happier lives.



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