

Parent Guide » Start with the Relationship

Who Is This For?

This guide is for anyone who interacts regularly with infants, toddlers, children, or teenagers. When we refer to “your child” or “your children” in this guide, we’re referring to the child you interact with regularly. You don’t need to share genes to create a resilient family culture. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Parents
- Stepparents
- Grandparents
 - Aunts
 - Uncles
- Foster parents
- Older siblings
- Caregivers
- Guardians

Start with the Relationship

How do you create lasting change and motivation in a child, particularly when times are hard or the child is resistant to your efforts? This isn’t always easy and may look different with each child and situation, but the starting point is always the same: ***start with the relationship.***

The fact is, in almost every relationship kids have with adults, they often feel a lack of control. In other words, they see the adult as the authority, or the one making all the decisions in their life. Sometimes, as a result, the child feels unimportant, invalidated, or that what they want or think doesn’t matter. They

may feel that their ability to act for themselves is taken away. As a result, they have little motivation to make changes and are less likely to confide in a caring adult.

When you are able to let go of a little bit of this authority and give your child a sense of control, you're well on your way to creating a resilient family environment – one where your child not only has their basic needs met, but feels safe to share their thoughts, feelings, and frustrations. When this is done effectively, your child will feel respected, motivated, and valued, and will be in a better position to thrive.

Here are four ways to create a resilient family environment:

- Spend quality time with your child
- Focus on what your child is doing right
- Listen to your child
- Create unity

Spend quality time with your child.

A recent study shows that quality parent time is directly correlated to positive outcomes with children. This is good news for those of us who spend most of our waking hours at work, often while battling feelings of guilt for not being home with our children. Quality, the study shows, is more important than quantity.

So what does quality time look like? We define quality time as any time that is focused on strengthening your relationship with your child. This doesn't necessarily mean that you have to go out for ice cream or head to a sporting event. When you're a busy parent, you can fold quality time into your day-to-day activities. Here are a few ideas:

Do things your kids love. If you have a video gamer, sit down sometime and learn to play a favorite video game with your child. Watch his or her favorite TV show together. Shoot hoops in the park. Listen to favorite music. Watch funny YouTube videos. When you make a real effort to get into your child's world, they will never forget it.

Have a meaningful bedtime routine. For smaller children, this can mean a bedtime story and a tuck-in. For teenagers, this could be an informal chat before bedtime where you talk about each other's days, challenges, things you're excited about, or plans for the following day.

Make a date out of grocery shopping. Have your child help you make the list, then find the items together.

Hang out over laundry. If you do your laundry at a local laundromat, there's lots of waiting time. Bring your child along and use this time to connect over homework, a game, or a simple conversation.

Prepare a meal together. If you have the luxury of being together at mealtime, have your child help you plan and prepare the meal, then connect during your time in the kitchen.

Eat meals together. Even if you don't have time to prepare fancy meals at home, try to make time to sit down for at least one meal during the day. This can be a bowl of cereal at breakfast or a frozen burrito in the evening. What's important is that you're both present together and talking.

Message with your child. If your schedule is so busy that your face-to-face time is limited with your child and your child is old enough to have a phone, take time during breaks throughout the day to send a text message or Snapchat, shoot over a funny video via social media, or do a FaceTime call. If your children don't have their own electronic devices, slip a note into their backpack or leave kind messages on the breakfast table.

Go for a drive. Have some errands to run or a day trip to make? Invite your child along. Use the time to take advantage of the rare opportunity to just sit and talk.

Work on a project together. If you have the skills to repair a leaky faucet, change the oil in a car, or weather-strip a door, complete these repairs with your child by your side. He/she will learn important skills and you'll create quality chat time.

Read together. Research has shown the many benefits of reading with a child. If you have a teenager, bring out a young adult novel and take turns reading it out loud.

Remember, small things matter! Any efforts you make throughout your day to be a part of your children's lives count as quality time and make a real difference.

Focus on What Your Child is Doing Right

How different would your family look if each night you asked yourself the question, "What did my child do right today? How can I recognize his/her positive character traits and behaviors more tomorrow?" Having this kind of conversation with yourself can help turn negative feelings of frustration and judgment toward your child into a more positive outlook that helps your child feel safe in your home.

As you work to focus more on what your child is doing right, remember the following:

Words matter. Select your words carefully. When you have to correct your child, try to focus on the behavior instead of the person. For example, instead of "You're so lazy," you might say, "I could really use your help cleaning the house today." When you find yourself tempted to label or criticize your child, take a deep breath while thinking of a way to address the behavior instead. It's OK to take a step back if you're not in the mood to keep your cool at that moment. Try to catch your child doing good. Build them up and encourage them as often as possible.

Respect leads to more respect. As you show your children that you respect and value them for who they are as human beings, regardless of what their outward behavior might look like, they'll feel that confidence from you and start to develop it in themselves. What's more, you'll foster a culture of respect where your children are more likely to respect you as well.

Follow the 5-to-1 rule. Research on families and businesses alike has shown the benefits of following the “5-to-1 rule,” which means for every criticism or correction you must make, try to make five comments acknowledging actions your child has done right. Be specific in your praise, rather than simply saying “good job” when something goes right.

Example Conversations:

Thanks for always being there to pick up your little sister from school.”

“I just got back from a parent-teacher conference and Mr. Jackson told me how you involve some of the lonelier kids during recess. I’m so proud of what a kind person you are.”

“You’ve been making a real effort to turn out the lights when you leave a room—that really helps cut down on our electric bills.”

“Your little brother loves it when you take the time to read storybooks to him at bedtime. Thanks for being a great older sister.”

Praise the effort, not the result. Even if you don’t see results from your child’s effort, praise them for trying hard. For example, if, after studying hard, they get a bad grade on a test, don’t be afraid to praise the **work your child put in**. Try to turn on your radar for catching your children doing something right, even if it’s a small thing, and especially when you’ve had a rough day and wouldn’t normally notice these positives. Also, pay attention to how you feel when you do this. It’s a small effort with a potentially large reward.

Listen to Your Child

You spend years learning how to read, write, and speak. But what about listening? How have you trained yourself in this crucial skill? When you can become proficient at this skill, something incredible happens: your child wants to talk to

you because he/she knows that you'll approach the conversation with the intent to understand. The strategies below will help you get started. Practice these in small, everyday conversations – doing so will help you prepare for the “big ones” when your listening ear will really be needed.

Give undivided attention. When your child is ready to talk to you about something important, it's not always going to be a convenient time. Undivided attention means that in those moments, you're willing to drop whatever you're doing – look up from whatever screen is in front of you – and tune in to your child. Make eye contact. Communicate with your body language, “I am here for you, I love you, I am listening.” In addition to these spontaneous moments of conversation, set aside time out of your own busy schedule to talk to your child. Make it an outing, if possible.

Paraphrase back. One simple but effective way to show that we're listening is to paraphrase what the child has said and then ask if we got it right. For example, our child might say, “I hate my math teacher; he doesn't like me and never answers my questions!” Instead of rushing in with advice on how to deal with the math teacher, you could say something like, “You sound pretty frustrated with your math class. Tell me more about why you think your teacher doesn't like you.” This sets the stage for the child to continue to share, earning the child's trust and opening up a dialogue for true problem solving to occur.

Show empathy. When listening to your child, accept that while the topic at hand might not interest you, it is important to your child and should, therefore, be treated as important. Similar to the paraphrasing exercise above, you can demonstrate empathy by stating back the emotion that you're seeing: “I'm guessing you're feeling pretty disappointed about not making the team,” or “I bet you're pretty angry right now about our no-sleepover rule. It can be a hard feeling left out of what everyone else is doing.” This softens the conversation for you to calmly explain your own reasons and feelings: “Your mother and I made a decision long ago that a rule like this was important for keeping our children safe.”

Create Unity

As most of us know all too well, simply living under the same roof as a group of related people does not necessarily guarantee a unified family. Here are some strategies for creating unity in the home:

Communicate. Have regular conversations or meetings with the entire family, allowing all family members to express themselves in a safe environment, without the fear of criticism. Ask the children what they like about their family, as well as seeking out their ideas for how to make improvements. When important decisions need to be made that involve your children, work toward solutions with your children's help. Even if you as the parent disagree with the opinions your children are expressing, don't say so in this setting. In addition to these family meetings, spend time one on one with each child and ask for their opinions on how things can improve.

Share household responsibilities. Be willing to participate with your children as they perform their assignments, offering encouragement and sharing your appreciation for their efforts. Some examples of household responsibilities you can share and complete with your child include:

- *Doing the dishes together*
- *Folding laundry*
- *Pulling weeds*
- *Picking up toys*
- *Cooking dinner*
- *Washing the car*

It can be easier to complete these household responsibilities on your own, but having some jobs that you complete together can build unity and even turn into something fun. Play favorite music, tell jokes, or just chat about your child's favorite topics to turn these basic activities into a family event.

Establish routines and traditions. Routines help children feel safe. Maintain a consistent schedule that is realistic for your family. For example, to the extent possible, try to serve dinner at the same time each evening and expect everyone

to attend whenever possible. If you can't do it every evening, you might establish a weekly tradition where you have dinner together as a family. Think of other traditions that you can participate in together weekly or even monthly.

Have fun together. If possible, go on a family outing once a month. These outings can be inexpensive and simple. Consider going on a trip to the woods, the library, a park, or a museum, or doing an activity you all love together, like playing a sport.

Get some one-on-one time. Once in a while, let your child pick the activity. Spend one-on-one time with each child individually whenever possible, doing activities your child has chosen.

Serve others. Fun is important in creating unity, and so is service. Bring cookies to neighbors, rake leaves or do yardwork for an elderly person in your life, or visit a rest home or soup kitchen in your community. Opportunities to make a difference are all around you. Help your children experience the joy that comes from helping another person.

Note: Don't get discouraged or overwhelmed as you look at these suggestions. No parent is perfect, and every parent has room for improvement. Pick one or two strategies that you'd like to try in your family, and start there.

Any efforts you make throughout your day to be a part of your children's lives count as quality time and make a real difference.

Reflection

Look over this chapter and pick one strategy that you'd like to apply to your family. Make a real effort this week to be better in this area. What strategy did you choose? How did it go?

The most amazing thing I've ever experienced, by far, hands down, is sitting on my couch, watching a basketball game on TV with my son Cooper. Or having Carson

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run to meet me at the door after a trip, a huge smile on his face... When it's all said and done, the only things that really matter are relationships."

Christian Moore – The Resilience Breakthrough, page 62