

Chapter 1

Closing the Barn Door
Before the Horse Gets Out

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*Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity,
When I give, I give myself.*

-Walt Whitman

When you stop and think about it, this thing called parenting is a rather daunting job. The responsibility for the emotional, physical, and spiritual welfare of your child rests solely on your shoulders. Yet, you have a limited amount of resources—financial, emotional, and logistical—at your disposal. It seems there’s never enough time and energy to give to your job, your aging parents, your growing children, and your own emotional nourishment and sanity. Divide those limited resources in half for the brave souls out there doing it alone—being mother, father, brother, sister all rolled into one.

Yet, no matter your circumstances, your ability to provide for your children, your reserve of patience and love, the clock keeps ticking day after day. A developing child’s emotional needs never stop. The necessity for creating and maintaining an enduring emotional connection never lessens. And your concern for your child’s future never ceases to weigh heavy on your mind.

What parent doesn’t worry about the emotional well-being of their child? Who doesn’t fear the inevitable pitfalls that can lead their child’s life down a path of pain and heartache? Who hasn’t been overwhelmed by the feelings of powerlessness that envelop you when the barriers your child erects become impossible to penetrate.

The happy-go-lucky world of your child—for whom you have so much hope, whose life holds such promise—can transform into a life of desperation punctuated by anger and alienation. Everything can change so quickly. A wrong choice here. A spiteful act there. Your bright child can spin a web of disobedience and wrongdoing with their misjudgments and shortsighted decisions. Perhaps, all because of too much time spent looking for love and

acceptance in all the wrong places.

Do you sense how fragile your bond to your child can be? Who isn’t forever vigilant for the symptoms of the undoing of that bond? You see, it’s the undoing of that connection that leaves your child most vulnerable. Vulnerable to the hazards that befall a child who loses the emotional connection to their family. Vulnerable to the harmful distractions a child escapes to when searching for ways to express their hurt, confusion, and fear. Vulnerable to the influences that come to pass when your child no longer feels grounded by their relationship with you—a groundedness that enables them to *talk out* rather than *act out* their troubles.

Sadly, most of us manage to see the symptoms of the bond unraveling in hindsight only. It can be so subtle. The drifting apart usually begins with indifference. That’s not so bad, at first. Sure indifference stings, but the emotional wall it creates is barely perceptible.

Yet before you know it, disinterest can escalate into alienation. The ever-present anger and hostility can strain any emotional connection. The burden of hostility can create an even greater emotional distance between you and your child—inevitably escalating into estrangement. After all, we’re dealing with the human frailties of both parent and child. Hurt and pain can only be ignored for so long.

Reacting to each other replaces *responding* to one another. This begins a vicious cycle of emotionally wounding one another. Ironically, the wounding and reacting is merely the best efforts of two imperfect people desperately trying to stop the free fall that has driven a wedge between them. Unfortunately, this free fall

becomes the basis for which your child turns away from you and your family.

And if your child disconnects, I needn't remind you of the dangers that await her. It's a virtual minefield out there. Without the security of a safe emotional connection to you, she can easily fall prey to any number of behavioral health risks—emotional dis-ease, smoking, substance abuse, school truancy, criminal behavior, violent behavior, sexual promiscuity, unplanned pregnancy, and suicidal thoughts and behavior.

It's no wonder that at times raising a child becomes overwhelming. Finding the right balance between protecting her and giving her freedom to grow while steering her clear of the many hazards of growing up can become a job bigger than you. Hopelessness can infect your spirit. For some parents, it's gone beyond being overwhelmed. Is impotence too strong a word? Have you come to believe that nothing you do or say will make a difference?

How should someone respond who finds himself stuck in the futility of winning the attention of his child's mind and heart? Here's a couple of strategies that come to mind: give in, give up, mark the days on the calendar until your child becomes somebody else's problem. Or get mad, fight back, all the while escalating the ever widening gap that may exist between you and your child.

How about a third option. One I endorse. How about investing your energies in your child's development today so as to avoid having to invest your energies in the problems your child can create for herself in the future? I'm talking about an option whereby you build a special relationship with your child; one grounded by an emo-

tionally safe connection that assures her well-being.

You see, it's all in the relationship. It's all in the emotional connection you create. Nurturing this tender, oftentimes fragile connection is the essence of what raising your child is all about. As you nurse along this emotional connection, not only will you create a rewarding experience for the both of you, you'll immunize your child against many of the hazards you so rightly fear.

There are special elements at the core of this relationship. Those special elements? A safe emotional connection built with your skills of understanding your child and your willingness to express that understanding. The importance of this cannot be overstated. What I'm about to tell you is a mouthful, but it's the essence of the work we will do together in this book. Take your time, and let its meaning sink in before you read too far along.

Your child's emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being is dependent on your ability to create and maintain a safe, emotional connection. The most effective way to create this emotional connection is to honor who your child is by understanding what she's experiencing in order to most effectively fulfill the emotional needs she is seeking to have fulfilled by your offering spirit.

How do you create a connection that's the essence of the relationship between you and your child? A process I call *entering the world of your child* will enable you to cultivate a safe, loving, mutually respectful relationship. This bond will give your child a piece of you to take with her out into her world. Mastering this process will enable you

to provide your child the emotional nutrients necessary for her growth and development.

There are three aspects to the process of *entering the world of your child*. First, you'll become more sensitized to what your child's emotional needs are and how best to fulfill them. You'll discover how to activate a source of energy that I refer to as your offering spirit and connect that spirit to your child's seeking spirit.

Second, you'll come to better understand the impact of your child's life experiences and how best to communicate that understanding to your child. Effective communication depends on your ability to create an emotionally safe atmosphere that encourages your child to be open and forthright. Equally important is expressing yourself in a way that honors your child's dignity.

Third, you'll learn how to effectively influence your child's growth and maturation. The very simple skills you learn and apply will empower your child to take ownership of her feelings and actions. In so doing, your child will become a responsible partner in this game of life.

Most important of all, *entering the world of your child* is your path to becoming a proactive parent. Trust me, that's what your child most secretly wants from you. They desperately need you to take leadership. They may rebel against it, but it's what they need and crave at the depth of their soul.

You need not surrender to the feelings of helplessness you encounter from time to time. Fear and powerlessness need no longer control or immobilize you. Anger need no longer create barriers. What you do and say matters!

I'm grateful for the opportunity to share with you skills that will make a profound difference in you and your

child's life. Not only will these skills enrich your relationship with your child, you'll also learn much about yourself and how best to enrich your own life. For embedded in the application of the skills you'll learn throughout this book are important life lessons. I wish you much success as you learn how to *enter the world of your child*. I hope you discover what thousands of parents like you have already learned for themselves.

- You can enrich the emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of your child.
- You can develop a bond from which a loving relationship with your child can be created—a bond that honors you and bestows dignity upon your child.
- You can protect your child from the behavioral health risks that any responsible parent is concerned about.
- You can make a difference!

There are no more profound lessons in life to be learned.

Bridge Builder's Checklist



Ways to safely enter the world of your child.

1. Respond rather than react to your child's feelings.
2. Connect your offering spirit to your child's seeking spirit.
3. Speak to your child's feelings rather than his

logic or beliefs.

4. Validate your child's feelings.
5. Encourage your child to express rather than act out her feelings.
6. Resolve conflict rather than fix problems.

As you read each chapter, each of the above steps will take on special meaning. As you become familiar with each step, return to this checklist to list any additional ways you can safely enter the world of your child.
