

Chapter 2

Knock Knock! Who's There?

T

*When dealing with yourself, use your head;
When dealing with your child, use kid gloves!*

-Stanley Phillips

Bridge Builder's Tip

“Entering the world of your child” creates a safe emotional connection that honors your child’s dignity.

Coffee mug in hand, you gently shake her shoulder as you lean over and sing in her ear, “Wake-up sunshine.”

Her left eye half opens and focuses on your smile. She grins back, then lickety-split, disappears beneath the covers. Although the next ten minutes are spent begging, pleading, cajoling, and even threatening, this is one of the more precious moments you spend with your child.

She giggles as you tickle her feet. She takes great pride in her new found power—her ability to frustrate your every effort to get her out of bed. The way she pleads with you for *just five more minutes*—sure she has you wrapped around her finger, but just for now, that’s not what’s important.

This is a time where schedules and routines can be set aside for the briefest of moments. Intuitively, you understand the importance of giving yourselves permission to experience one another. It’s an opportunity for her to discover how kind and gentle you can be before you don your war paint for the rest of the day. You discover her talents for negotiation in the guise of her fun and games.

Bit by bit you’re empowering this child. You’re teaching her the give and take of life. She’s learning how far is too far as she begins to test her wings. This is a child with a will. There’s an emerging Self in every thought she expresses, each act she perpetrates. And just for now, you allow yourself to celebrate this growing, evolving, loving, mischievous, impish miracle of your life.

Her playfulness gives you permission to put your

guard down long enough to go there with her. This time with her renews those parts of you that you put away long ago. You take time to remember there’s more to life than train schedules, long commutes, work deadlines, school activities, bills, and mortgages.

These are the moments you feel it the strongest—that connection, a bond. The spoken word, with all its limits, can describe the connection, but never can the spoken word capture its essence. There’s an unwritten understanding between you and your child that says, “No one, no thing is going to hurt you on my watch.”

Your child knows you’re safe, and because of that the world’s safe, life’s safe. It’s not taken for granted, there’s just no need to verbally acknowledge what exists between you. This trust or faith or hollowed belief, it’s understood by her that you accept her at her deepest being.

Do you get impatient with her? Sure! Does this child know how to raise the mercury on your frustration-ometer? Of course she does! She can test you beyond the limits of a saint. Does your anger continue to raise it’s ugly head from time to time? You bet! We all have our own healing and growing to do. But judgmental? No, that’s corrosive to any bond and she knows she needn’t worry—it’s okay to be herself with you.

It’s in these tender moments that your child does more than *know* the truth about you, she experiences it. You stop being the keeper of the rules and become a loving soul. During this early rise play time, in her eyes, you’re nothing more than her gentle playmate. Just for these few moments, she doesn’t see you as the keeper of the rules, but as a caring, kind partner in life.

In the midst of all of her playfulness, she senses a

depth of understanding from within you that transcends the spoken word. How so? She trusts that you can leave your view of the world behind long enough, that you can step out of your skin and climb into the way she thinks and feels about life. It's not a bond created by lectures and obedience, it's a connection between two souls.

But things change. Many transformations of this bond await the two of you. For some, the bond matures, ripens. The feelings for each other deepen as appreciation, respect, disappointment, and other facets of any relationship get thrown into the mix. Other dynamics begin to characterize the connection as well. The need for space—"Leave me alone!" The demand for room—"Hey man, I've got to be me." The beginning of separating from the family—"I don't hang out with my parents." The struggle for autonomy—"I'm old enough to make my own decisions." If you do the work, then these are okay things, experienced only as natural rites of passage.

Sadly, for many of you, the connection doesn't transform as much as it implodes. Where once you could almost touch, taste, and feel the bond, now a shift has taken place. Before, it was so simple—a twinkle in her eye or a shared chuckle to a private joke that only you and she understood. But things happen, children grow, relationships end, life partners split-up, circumstances change, and so does the connection that you so carefully crafted.

Where once you felt like you had a death grip on the connection, now it feels like she's slipping through your very fingers.

Where once you felt like you were her whole world, now you feel like a small piece of a very large picture.

Where once you felt like you could do no wrong in

her eyes, now you search for the smallest of hints that your existence matters in the least to her.

Where once you thought you were her window to the world, so many others have begun to influence and shape who she's becoming.

Where once you felt like you always knew what your princess was feeling and thinking, now you're made to feel like an intruder in her very private world.

Where once you saw each day as an adventure for her to learn and become, now it seems each new experience of growth for her is one more experience of loss for you.

Where once you felt like there was give and take, now it seems as if there's only taking, with very little giving.

It doesn't have to be that way. You can create a relationship that withstands life's inevitable ups and downs. You can forge a strong bond that will sustain and evolve.

It's no secret what's required of you to make it happen. Hard work, heartache, humility—there's a big learning curve requiring you to be both student and teacher. That's the routine—the day to day ethic required of you. That's the tension churning in the pit of your stomach.

There's no need to romanticize the work that goes into it. Creating an enduring emotional connection with your child is a grind. But it's a job that can be made infinitely easier, far more enjoyable. My work with parents like you has taught me there are only two things you need to overcome—not knowing what to do and not knowing how to do what you're suppose to do.

The payback for your investment is incalculable. There's nothing more noble than creating and maintaining this emotional connection. Nothing's more important to your child's well-being than nurturing it.

So just what is this emotional connection? It's a lifeline—the catalyst for your child's growth and development as well as the means by which she can avoid the pitfalls that threaten her well-being.

Tethered safely to this lifeline, she can go off into the world to experiment with life. After all, there are choices to be considered, risks to be taken, mistakes to be made, lessons to be learned. All this needs to take place with the knowledge that there's at least one person she can return to without being emotionally or physically beaten up for being herself.

This emotional connection is more than a lifeline that enables her to explore and experiment. It's a conduit that carries the emotional sustenance she needs and craves. Acceptance. Affirmation. Commitment. Forgiveness. Involvement. Love. Personal freedom. Nurturance. Validation.

Don't get me wrong. It will often feel like the loneliest job, as if you're the only one to whom this matters. Though it may feel like she's fighting you, more times than not, believe me, she's desperate for this connection.

I've already spoken about how we're going to cultivate this emotional connection—by *entering the world of your child*. It's the process you'll use to build a bridge between you and her. The tools used to construct this bridge? I've told you that as well—skills of understanding your child and expressing that understanding to her. You see, when it's all said and done, what she craves most is to be understood.

How do you enter the world of your child? It begins with making a critical choice. You must choose to adopt a special attitude towards your child about your child: you

must begin to see that your child is not a problem to be solved, but a person to be understood.

There are important implications for anyone who assumes such an attitude. Parenting will be less rule bound and more connection bound. It will become a process of encouraging rather than an act of dictating. Affirming and validating will take precedence over correcting and condemning. Demanding and convincing will give way to guiding and acknowledging. Your motto will become, "Emotional safety first and foremost!"

Let me forewarn you: if you make this critical first choice, a whole new series of choices will follow. You'll need to choose to:

- value rather than dictate your child's life choices.
- validate rather than nullify your child's life experiences.
- respond rather than react to your child.
- detach from your attitudes and experiences rather than impose them upon your child.
- empower your child to *become* rather than force upon them who you want them to be.
- encourage your child to create solutions rather than fix her problems for her.
- honor rather than ridicule your child's thoughts and feelings.

These shifts are essential for how well you relate to your child. You know the old saying, you don't know a person until you've walked a mile in their shoes. *Entering the world of your child* will enable you to do just that—walk a mile in your child's shoes.

Here's why it's so important for you to learn how to

walk the walk with your child—your child desperately needs your support and encouragement. Support and encouragement are essential emotional nutrients. As she begins to trust your love and support, she'll begin to discover just how safe you can be.

Beyond walking the walk, *entering the world of your child* will enable you to empower her to take ownership of her actions and well-being. Imagine how she'll benefit as you're better able to support her efforts to boldly explore her world rather than retreat in fear.

Empowering your child is an art form. There's an incredible balancing act that takes place. On one hand, you need to support your child's efforts to discover how to apply her innate talents in her life. On the other hand, it's your job to set limits and contain her exploration when she crosses the line between what's safe and what's unsafe, as well as what is and isn't age appropriate behavior.

It's likely that at times there will be much about *entering the world of your child* you'll find confusing. Very little is black and white. Seldom will one rule of thumb apply to every situation. Expect it. More importantly, accept that much about raising your child is gray and murky. However, don't lose sight of this important fact: children are very forgiving. They'll respect you for trying, even if they don't like what you're doing.

As we conclude this chapter, let me set you straight about one more thing. Although learning how to enter the world of your child is critical to your child's well-being, you're not going to get it right every time.

Give yourself permission to experiment with these skills. Entering the world of your child is not about always getting it right. It's about refusing to cave in to the

demands of your unhappy child. It's about learning not to be overly protective of your child's natural tendency to want to test her wings. It's about not becoming discouraged and giving up. It's about making their world a safer place. Communicating more effectively with your child by better understanding their life experiences. Finally, what *entering the world of your child* is mostly about is discovering the miracle of who your child is and the joy she can bring to your life.

Bridge Builder's Checklist



Benefits of learning how to enter the world of your child.

You will:

1. create a bridge of understanding.
2. create an emotionally safe connection.
3. create an atmosphere of mutual respect.
4. defuse power struggles and conflict.
5. empower your child's development.
6. enrich your child's emotional well-being.
7. establish a rapport of encouragement and support.
8. establish an effective style of communication.
9. fulfill your child's emotional needs.
10. protect your child from the behavioral health risks associated with growing up.

On the next page, write down how you and your child will benefit from you learning how to enter her world.

