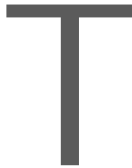


Chapter 3

*B*uckle Up For Safety



*Service to a just cause rewards the worker
with more real happiness and satisfaction
than any other venture of life.*

-Carrie Chapman Catt

Bridge Builder's Tip



Responding rather than reacting to your child will make your relationship emotionally safe.

I spend my lunch hour in the summer at a park near my office. While eating, I watch dogs train their owners, neighborhood kids shoot hoops, hard fought tennis matches waged between friend and foe alike, as well as the trials and tribulations of people trying to hit a round ball with a long stick.

After awhile you get to know some of the regulars—moms with their kids, people from the neighborhood taking in the sun, office workers from local businesses. One woman in particular, Lucy, often shares her lunch hour with me. We've gotten to know each other over the years through swapping life stories, and things that are important to us.

One afternoon the subject of raising kids came up. I told her about a parenting book I was thinking of writing. After exchanging ideas for a half-hour, she shared with me some experiences from her childhood that had influenced the way she has raised her children.

"I'm a lot clearer today about the things that happened in my childhood. Back then, I guess I was too young to understand what was really happening.

"My father left our family when I was seven. I'm sure it's a story you've heard a thousand times before. My parents were too immature to take care of themselves, let

alone raise a family. Dad drank too much. Mom fooled around as a way of getting back at him. The fighting that went on between the two of them was non-stop."

"How horrible it must have been for you," I said.

"I suppose. Funny thing is, at the time, the worst part of it was, I blamed myself for much of what happened between them."

"You took on all that responsibility yourself?" I asked.

"I'm afraid I did," Lucy said. "There were so many unanswered questions. Why did my parents treat each other the way they did? Why did my father leave, never to return? What was wrong with me that made him leave? Blaming myself seemed like the most obvious answer.

"So, I made myself the problem. I decided I was the reason my father left," Lucy said, shrugging.

"I'm so sorry you went through that," I said.

"Well, it was hard, but nothing prepared me for what happened when I finally tried to get some straight answers from my father. I was twelve at the time, but I remember it as if it happened yesterday," Lucy said.

"I hadn't seen my dad in about three years. For some reason he called my mom to see if he could take me to a movie. She said it would be alright. I reluctantly went, mostly because I wanted to find out once and for all why he had left us."

"Wow, that took a lot of courage, taking on your father like that!" I said.

"I didn't think of it that way at the time—I just needed to know. But the way things turned out—you're right, it took a certain amount of courage.

"Anyway, we saw a movie, then got a bite to eat. While we were eating, I started telling him all the things

I had bottled up inside me.

“I didn’t mean to upset him, I was just trying to understand. I wanted to know why I wasn’t worth the trouble for him to keep our family together. I needed to know once and for all why drinking was more important to him than me. Just this once, I wanted him to know what it felt like all those years, wondering, never knowing or understanding.

“Growing up, it had been so confusing. After all, he was my father—I loved him, but at the same time I felt so much hurt and anger towards him.”

Lucy’s face contorted with pain as she continued. “All those years, all the confusion. I just couldn’t live anymore without knowing, without him knowing, without him finally explaining.

“I became so upset, my anger boiled to the surface, and I began to cry. I couldn’t hold it back any longer—there was so much anger, all the resentments and outright hatred for what he’d done to our family. He had to know! I had to tell him how screwed up I felt about it all.”

“How did your father take what you had to say?” I asked.

“Not good! I knew, even as it was happening, how it was going to end. I could see how uncomfortable he felt. He did everything he could to make me stop. He tried changing the subject. That didn’t work, so he tried to talk me out of my feelings. He threw in a few corny jokes, which just made me more angry.

“At one point, he had the nerve to start lashing out at me. He actually tried to turn the tables on me. Can you imagine the nerve of that S.O.B? But I refused to back down. Eventually, he just slumped down in his seat, threw

his arms up in the air and refused to answer my questions. When I persisted, he got up from the table and left. That was the last time I ever saw him.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I said.

“As painful as that day was, some good came of it,” Lucy said. “After spending so many years living in fear and self-hate, I realized my father was the problem, not me.

“Once I understood that my feelings were appropriate, that expressing them was appropriate, I made a promise to myself. I promised I would never do to my children what my father did to me that day.

“I vowed never to punish my kids for expressing themselves. Never were they going to feel unsafe expressing their feelings, never would they fear being punished for telling me what was on their mind.

“Dear ole’ dad gave me something much more important that day than some lame excuse for his choices. He demonstrated how best to destroy any remnant of a connection that existed between us.”

“So what was the value of that?” I asked.

“I realized that if I wanted my children to bond with me, to stay connected to me, they would first have to feel safe to do so.”

“Okay,” I said. “Knowing that is one thing, doing it is something very different. What’s your secret?”

“I stay present. If my kids know one thing about me it’s that I’m there for them. We’ve built a bond of trust. They know I won’t turn on them or leave them.

“Great theory, but how do you pull it off?” I asked.

“I guess it all boils down to one simple thing—making it safe. That’s something my father never did for me. I never react to my children, I only respond to them,”

Lucy concluded, a look of self-satisfaction on her face.

Lucy's absolutely right! The first rule of thumb for creating an emotional connection is to establish a climate of emotional safety. An emotionally safe connection is the gateway to your child's soul. Without a climate of trust and safety, there's no possibility of establishing that connection. No emotional connection, *no entering the world of your child*. It's that simple.

There's only one way to create a climate of trust and safety. It's just what Lucy said—*respond rather than react to your child's feelings*. It's easy to see why that's so important. Growing up is a scary, confusing proposition for the best of us. Your child needs someone he can feel anchored to. Experiencing you as emotionally safe provides the necessary grounding for your child to trust you.

Can you see how trust is an important element of emotional safety? It's not enough to encourage your child to say what's on his mind. You need to show him that no harm will come his way when he does express himself. Interacting with your child without judging, punishing, or physically or emotionally abandoning him is the bedrock of this connection. How can you ensure your child doesn't feel judged or abandoned? We're right back to where we started—*responding* rather than *reacting*.

How do you respond rather than react to your child's feelings? Here's the formula: one part encouragement, one part support. Stir gently with love and compassion. It's that simple! By the way, did you notice what's absent? Did you notice that blame is not an ingredient in creating an emotionally safe relationship?

Let me tell you about two friends of mine, Abby and Stephanie Phillips. These sisters know how to respond to

each other. Abby's seven and Stephanie's three. Stephanie knows just who to reach out to and Abby knows how to respond when Stephanie does. Both understand how good it feels to express what they're feeling and trust that each one will be there for the other.

While baby-sitting I had the opportunity to watch the two in action. Right around dinner time, we heard a loud clap of thunder in the distance. With each crackle of lightning Stephanie became more frightened. Little tear drops welled up in her eyes as the storm moved in. I tried to comfort her, but she would have nothing to do with it.

Finally, she yelled out, "Abby, Abby, I scared, I scared."

When Abby heard her name, she ran into the living room to see why Stephanie was shouting.

"What's the matter Stephie?" she asked.

Stephanie repeated her refrain, "Abby, I scared, I scared!"

Abby's rosy face broke into a grin as she cooed to Stephanie, "It'll be all right, Stephie, everything will be just fine."

With that, Abby wrapped her arms around Stephanie and slowly rocked her.

As they rocked, Stephanie rested her head on Abby's shoulder. As Abby held her, Stephanie's tears dried. Her face transformed into peaceful contentment, even though the storm raged on for the next hour.

Do you see how Abby was emotionally present for her sister? She knew Stephanie was afraid and she tried to comfort her. She responded to Stephanie's fear by holding her.

Abby didn't try to talk Stephanie out of her feelings. Stephanie wasn't made to feel wrong for being frightened. I never once heard Abby tell her to "Get over it." Abby

didn't walk away or give her sister the silent treatment because she was a nuisance. That's what it takes to be present for your child.

This idea of responding vs. reacting can be rather abstract. Remember, at the heart of what we're doing is developing specific skills. So let's get some practice in. You know the old saying, practice makes perfect.

I've created three separate scenarios to demonstrate the difference between reacting and responding. Remember the formula from above for how to respond? One part encouragement, one part support. Stir gently with love and compassion. And don't forget, leave out the blame. The first scenario demonstrates blame; the second scenario, support; the third, encouragement.

Each scenario has two different scripts. In the first script, you'll see how the parent reacts to the child and in the second script you'll see how the parent responds to the child. See if you can identify the ways the parent is responding and the ways the parent is reacting. If you need help identifying specific ways a parent responds or reacts, go to the checklist on the last page of this chapter. You'll likely think of other strategies to add to the list.

As you go through each scenario, focus on how the child is made to feel in each interaction with their parent. Think about how that would encourage or discourage a child to let their parent into their world.

The Blame Scenario

Script #1

"Dad, Kyle pulled my hair again," Sally said, tearfully.
"How stupid can you be, Sally. I tell you time and

time again not to play with him anymore. Why don't you listen to me?"

Script #2

"Dad, Kyle pulled my hair again," Sally said, tearfully.
"Honey, I see how upset you are. Does it hurt? How can I help you learn to better get along with Kyle?"

What's the difference between Dad's behavior in script's #1 and #2? What are the ways he reacts to and what are the ways he responds to Sally?

How is Sally affected by Dad's words in script #1? In script # 2?

The Support Scenario

Script #1

"How was school today, dear?" Bob's mom asked.
"It sucked!"
"What do you mean it sucked? What kind of way is that to talk?" Bob's mom asked.
"Don't worry about how I talk! When are you going to do something about Mr. Riegel? He keeps picking on

me in class. Now he’s making me write a 500 word essay—*The Importance of Respecting My Elders*. Boy, talk about the work of fiction that one’s going to be.”

“What did you do now?” Bob’s mom asked.

“What do you mean ‘what did I do now?’” Bob said.

“Don’t take that defensive tone with me young man. I’ll have you writing essays for me till you turn eighteen if you don’t check that mouth of yours!”

“Thanks for being there for me, Mom,” Bob said.

“Please, I’ve had a hard day myself. I don’t need your sarcasm right now,” Mom countered.

“I should have known better than to say anything to you. Once again you make me out to be wrong. Why do you always assume I did something wrong? I would love it if just once you waited to hear my side of things before jumping to conclusions.”

Mom stared at Bob, then said, “If that’s the way you feel about me, perhaps you would prefer it if we didn’t speak to each other anymore.”

Satisfied that she made her point, she left a stunned Bob standing alone in the kitchen.

Script #2

“How was school today, dear?” Bob’s mom asked.

“It sucked!”

“It sounds like things didn’t go well today,” Bob’s mom observed.

“Boy, is that an understatement,” Bob said.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Mom asked.

“Not really. What good will talking about it do?”

“My, whatever it is, it sounds awfully big. Sometimes

two heads can be better than one.”

“Oh, it’s big alright. But you wouldn’t understand. You don’t know how it is.”

“You’re right, I may not know how it is for you but I do know that you’re upset. I know how it is for you when you’re hurting.”

“No offense, Mom, but what good will that do? It won’t solve the problem between me and Mr. Riegel.”

“Bobby, I don’t know how to solve the problem between the two of you. I don’t doubt that there are things the both of you need to start acting different about. But I want you to know that not everybody is against you. You don’t have to be as alone with this as you make it for yourself. I’m here and I want to go through this with you, not against you.

What’s the difference between Mom’s behavior in script’s #1 and #2? What are the ways she reacts to and what are the ways she responds to Bob?

How is Bob affected by Mom’s words in script #1? In script # 2?

The Encouragement Scenario

Script #1

“Morning Lizzie. Big day today!”

“Dad, I’m so nervous I could jump out of my skin.”

“Lizzie, you’re just like your mother. Drama, drama, drama. Everything’s a drama with you. Don’t you think you’re overreacting to this just a little bit?”

“Dad this is why I never want to tell you anything. Everything’s a joke with you. You never pass up an opportunity to get a dig in, always with the cheap shots.

“Oh, what’s the big deal? You’re taking a driver’s test. This isn’t brain surgery we’re talking about. All I’m trying to tell you is, you’ve practiced, you’ve studied, you’re prepared. What’s the big deal? I’m not putting you down. I’m on your side. I’m in your corner. Why do you have to get so worked up? Can’t you just relax?”

“I’m sorry Dad if I’m not acting in a way that makes sense to you. I’m sorry if my feelings get in your way. I’m sorry if I don’t see the humor in your cruel comments. I’m sorry if I feel more put down than encouraged by you. Excuuuuse me!”

Script #2

“Morning Lizzie. Big day today!”

“Dad, I’m so nervous I could jump out of my skin.”

“You don’t have to tell me, I remember what it was like when I took my driver’s test. I was thinking, if you want, we can take a spin around the block to get some last minute practice in for the test.”

“What are you saying, that I need more practice if I want to pass the test?”

“Nope, not at all. I just thought it might calm you down. You already know my position on the matter. You’ve taken your practice very seriously. When you’re out there with me, I think you do an excellent job. I can’t think of any question that you’re not prepared to answer. I think all that’s left to do is take the test. Once you do that, it’ll all be over except the shouting.”

“I don’t know if you’re telling the truth or just trying to butter me up, but thanks for your encouragement.”

What’s the difference between Dad’s behavior in script’s #1 and #2? What are the ways he reacts to and what are the ways he responds to Lizzie?

How is Lizzie affected by Dad’s words in script #1? In script # 2?

There’s no denying how important emotional safety is to the well-being of your relationship with your child. And the best way to create a climate of safety is to respond rather than react to your child.

Once a climate of emotional safety has been created,

the way has been paved to connect with your child. One way to build an emotional connection is by fulfilling your child's emotional needs. In the next chapter we'll focus on the essence of what an emotional connection is and how to use that bond to fulfill your child's emotional needs.

Bridge Builder's Checklist



Do's and Don'ts of Responding to Your Child

1. Do hear your child out.
2. Don't build a case against him.
3. Do support your child.
4. Don't blame him.
5. Do stay present with your child.
6. Don't emotionally or physically abandon him.
7. Do acknowledge your child's feelings.
8. Don't belittle his feelings.
9. Do affirm your child's worth.
10. Don't devalue who he is.
11. Do normalize your child's feelings.
12. Don't judge his feelings as wrong or inappropriate.

List how best to respond to your child and how to avoid reacting to your child.
