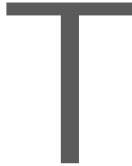


Chapter 6

The Mirror of Love



*The music that can deepest reach.
And cure all ill, is cordial speech.*

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Bridge Builder's Tip



Validating your child's feelings and experiences builds a bridge of love and respect between you and your child.

Chris was out in the barn lifting bails of hay from the floor up to the loft above.

The door down below opened and Chris's mom entered the barn. "Ma?" he asked. "That you?"

"Yes, sweetheart, it's me."

She set silently about her work, moving tools, later, feeding the chickens.

"I'm leaving for town after dinner," Chris shouted down to his mom. There's that school dance tonight."

"I'll make an early supper. We can eat at four or four-thirty," Mom said. "That reminds me, how's your new friend, Becky?"

"Whoa! Slow down! She's not my new friend yet. I don't think she wants anything to do with me. She's so hard to figure out."

"Why's that Chris?" Mom asked.

"I can't get her to talk to me," Chris responded.

"Why not, Chris, you're such a nice boy?"

"You're my mom, you're supposed to think that, but I can't figure out how to break the ice with her," Chris said.

"Have you tried talking to her?"

"Not exactly," Chris replied, self-consciously.

"That explains things some," Mom chuckled.

"What?" Chris asked.

"You can't really say that Becky doesn't want anything to do with you until you first try to talk to her."

"You know how it is. We sorta talk, but I never seem to get out the things I want to say to her," Chris said.

"What do you want to say to her, dear?"

"I want to ask her out. I just can't get up the nerve."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know, Ma. She's everything I want. She's smart, kind, great looking. Have I ever told you how funny she is? But I'm afraid if I open my mouth, if I let her know I like her, I'll end up looking like a fool."

Mom walked up to Chris and hugged him. "I understand. Your father was like that when we first met. He might as well have had a mouth full of marbles," she said.

"Really?"

"Sure. The first time he asked me out he walked up to me and said, 'excuse me, would you like to go out to eat a movie and see dinner afterwards? I was so touched, I could see he was really trying.

"You must have laughed your head off silly when he said that to you," Chris said.

"Quite the contrary. There was no way I was going to make him feel bad. I understood how nervous he was, so I was very careful not to humiliate him—afterall that was a big risk for him to take."

"Ma, that's a nice story, but I just can't seem to find anything to talk about with her."

Chris continued, "I ask myself, 'what's there to be so worried about?' I have no problem when it comes to speaking to the guys. I feel like there's something wrong with me. When it comes to her, I feel like I'm crazy or

socially retarded.”

“You sound so scared. I just wish there was something I could do to make it easier for you.”

“That helps Ma. Being able to say something, you know, it’s good to have someone else to say this stuff to. When I stew about this stuff it makes me feel like I’m a wacko. I guess I feel a little more normal about it when I talk to you.

“I don’t think anyone else would understand it, the way you do Ma. I wouldn’t want any one else to know. They’d give me the business.”

“Chris, there’s nothing stupid about how you’re feeling. I know how scary it is to risk being rejected. It’s hard for me to watch you go through this, but I trust that things will work out for you. You know I’m here for you, honey, don’t you?”

“Sure I do, Ma,” Chris said.

“I’m proud of you and I know Becky will be too, that is when you give her the chance to get to know you.”

Expressing feelings. Risking rejection. Staking a claim to what matters most. Daring to venture down a path that leads to what one desires. Doing wrong without making oneself wrong. Uncovering a new piece of Self. Giving birth to an Essence. All of this done in the dark shadows of others’ expectations. Rejection risked for the sweet taste of another human’s acceptance.

That’s the process of emotional development that your child goes through. Aligning with that process will unlock the entrance to the world of your child. Nurturing that process will give your child permission to experiment with life. Honoring that process will give your child the courage to take risks with the different pieces of who they

are. Facilitating that process will offer validation to the essence of your child’s being.

When you validate your child’s feelings, you demonstrate to him your willingness to see the world through his eyes. It’s an act of love. This one singular act will melt the barriers that shut you out of your child’s world.

There’s no greater gift you can offer your child than to validate who he is as a thinking, feeling, human being. When I share this sentiment with people, I often get blank stares. Or else, people argue the point with me. I am often asked how can I agree with someone when I know they’re dead wrong. My response is that the very question they ask is the root of the problem.

By validating your child’s feelings, you don’t have to make your child out to be right or wrong. You’re simply acknowledging that you understand how life is falling on your child at that particular moment. You see, this is about how your child’s perception of a situation makes him feel, not about your evaluation of how the situation should make him feel. If you’re able to accept that, you’re half-way there.

So how do you validate your child’s feelings? We’re back to your mindset and the choices you have. You can choose to engage your child in a way that makes him out to be right or wrong or you can engage him in a kind, supportive, affirming manner.

Do you get what I mean? If your goal is to create a long lasting emotional connection with your child, you’ll find that you’ll need to let go of all the ways you make your child out to be wrong. Can you identify the ways you may engage your child in a way that makes you right and him wrong? Imagine how your relationship might be

different with your child if you were to embrace the spirit of the following:

Your child does not want to be argued out of what he thinks or feel. He only wants you to listen to what he is experiencing in order to support his efforts to overcome the obstacle(s) in his path.

Did you notice how Chris's mom from the story above didn't argue about how Chris was feeling? Did you notice how she validated his feelings? Can you see how helpful it was to Chris for his Mom to just listen to him without trying to convince him of how wrong he was to feel the way he was feeling. Write down what impact you believe his mom's listening had on Chris?

Your child does not want you to prove his feelings to be wrong. He does not want to benefit from your years of experience. If you believe you should be named Parent of the Year for sharing your wisdom while trampling his feelings, you're going to be sorely disappointed. No matter how well intended or insightful your advice or suggestions may be, your child will more often than not resent you failing to honor his feelings rather than appreciate you for pointing out the error of his ways.

The only thing I know that will sustain the trust, love, and affection of your child is validating who they are and how they experience the way life affects them. That doesn't mean rubber stamping everything they say. It means communicating how you understand their experiences.

Let's see if I can make the act of validation come to life for you. Take your time with the following scenario I have created and see how well you can relate to what

Ronnie is going through with his mom.

The Dancing Scenario: Part 1

"I don't want to take dance lessons. I don't want to have to embarrass myself in front of everybody else," Ronnie said to his mother.

"Oh Ronnie, stop being so dramatic. You're not going to embarrass yourself," his mom said.

"I will too. You don't understand. I'm not going. I'm not going. You can't make me."

"Ronnie, I'm not going to keep having this discussion with you. You're being unreasonable. I have better things to do than listen to you go on and on about this. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't make you go."

"I told you, I don't want to embarrass myself," Ronnie said.

"You're overreacting. You're not going to embarrass yourself. There's absolutely no reason for you to think that way. Case closed. End of discussion."

What do you think about Mom's attempts to understand Ronnie? How much of Mom's approach to understanding Ronnie lives and breathes with your child?

Have you ever thought about this before? Where do you invest the bulk of your energy when you communicate with your child? Making yourself right and him wrong? Justifying your position or understanding your child's feelings How about this one? Making your child justify his feelings to you?

These are all the ways we invalidate one another. These are all ways we communicate a lack of acceptance for somebody else.

Let's see if there's anything you can learn about yourself by looking at the dance that Ronnie and his mom went through in the previous scenario. How do you think Ronnie felt after his conversation with his mother?

What did his mom say to make Ronnie feel that way?

What could mom have done differently in order to arrive at a different outcome?

Now let's change the dialogue a bit. Let's see how the outcome changes.

The Dancing Scenario: Part 2

"I don't want to take dance lessons. I don't want to

have to embarrass myself in front of everybody else," Ronnie said to his mother.

"Ronnie, what are you so afraid of?" Mom asked.

"I don't know what I'm doing and everyone else does," Ronnie said.

"We all feel afraid when we try something new," Mom agreed.

"Yea, but it's going to be just awful. I know I'm already awful at this. I've tried dancing in my room. I just can't get it right."

"I know how hard it is for you to try something new. Is there anything else that is frightening you about these dance lessons?"

"Well, yea. When we're at school, I know what to do. I play with the guys and all that, but I won't know how to act at dance school."

Mom gave Ronnie a big hug as she said, "I know what you mean. I'm not so old that I can't remember how terrified I was when I had to take my first dance lesson. I thought I would never be able to live through it."

"I bet you just didn't go, huh Mom?" Ronnie asked, hoping this might be his way out, as well.

"Well no, not exactly, sweetheart. My mother asked me what she could do to make things easier for me and we wound up striking a deal."

"A deal?" Ronnie asked, somewhat suspiciously.

"Yea, we made a deal that if I went to the first three lessons and didn't like it, I wouldn't have to go back."

"Oh, how did that work out?" Ronnie asked, his curiosity aroused.

"The first two weeks were horrible, I'm not going to lie to you. But by the third week, I felt a little more com-

fortable so I decided to keep going. Two years later, I met Daddy at a dance and the rest, as they say, is history.”

“Mom, do you think you and I can make the same kind of deal?”

“Only if you want to, Ronnie,” mom said as she leaned over to give him a hug and kiss.

Quite a different outcome, wouldn't you say? Why do you think that happened? Was Mom being sneaky, manipulative, or was something else at play here? Was Mom more effective in the second story or the first story? If so, what made her more effective?

What lessons might there be from these two stories? What shifts can you start making in your words and actions towards your child that may wind up with them feeling less argued with and more validated by you?

Let's make validation as concrete as possible. Here's a five step process to follow. I have repeated the dialogue from Ronnie and his mother that exemplifies what each specific step looks like in the previous anecdote.

Five Steps to Validating Your Child's Feelings

Step 1: Listen to your child in order that you may understand them rather than prepare to argue them out of their feelings. For example:

“I don't want to take dance lessons. I don't want to have to embarrass myself in front of everybody else,” Ronnie said to his mother.

“Ronnie, what are you so afraid of?” Mom asked.

“I don't know what I'm doing and everyone else does,” Ronnie said.

“We all feel afraid when we try something new,” Mom agreed.

Step 2: Encourage your child to talk about what they want to express, rather than cut them off in order to have them listen to your agenda. For example:

“Yea, but it's going to be just awful. I know I'm already awful at this. I've practiced dancing up in my room. I just can't get it right.”

“I know how hard it is for you to try something new. Is there anything else that is frightening you about these dance lessons?”

“Well, yea. When we're at school, I know what to do. I play with the guys and all that, but I won't know how to act at dance school.”

Step 3: Normalize the feelings being expressed rather than minimize them. For example:

“I know how hard it is for you to try something new. Is there anything else that is frightening you about these dance lessons?”

“Well, yea. When we're at school I know what to do.

I play with the guys and all that, but I won't know how to act at dance school."

Mom gave Ronnie a big hug as she said, "I know just what you mean. I'm not so old that I can't remember how terrified I was when I had to take my first dance lesson. I thought I was never going to be able to live through it."

Step 4: Express what it is that you understand about the feelings your child is sharing. For example:

"Ronnie, what are you so afraid of?" Mom asked.

"I don't know what I'm doing and everyone else does," Ronnie said.

"We all feel afraid when we try something new," Mom agreed.

Step 5: Express your willingness to support them. For example:

"Mom, do you think you and I can make the same kind of deal?"

"Only if you want to, Ronnie," Mom said as she leaned over to give him a hug and a kiss.

There's much to be gained from making the shifts I've suggested to you. So many of the wounds that exist between you and your child can be healed by simply taking the time to validate your child's life experiences. In so doing, you'll experience many of the walls between you and your child melt away. Of equal importance, you'll discover how to create a bridge of understanding. You see that's the wonder of it all, not only will you begin to heal some wounds, you'll begin to enrich the emotional connection with your child. After all, what greater gift can you give to yourself and your child?

There's one last aspect to entering the world of your child. We've talked about the foundation of emotional safety. We've looked at two ways of creating an emotional connection with your child. First, you learned how to create a link by connecting your offering spirit with your child's seeking spirit. Second, you make a connection by communicating how you understand what your child is experiencing in their world.

But things can't be rosy all the time. Conflict is an inevitable part of the emotional connection with your child. However, entering the world of your child can help you eliminate some of the conflict by creating a climate of permission for your child to express rather than act out his feelings. Even when you find yourself stuck in a never ending circle of unresolved conflict, there's a skill that you can apply that will empower you to resolve conflict. That's what the next two chapters have in store for you.

Bridge Builder's Checklist



The do's and don'ts of validating your child's feelings.

1. Do make yourself available for your child to express what they're feeling.
2. Do honor the feelings your child expresses to you.
3. Do let your child know that it's okay to be experiencing the feelings that they express to you.
4. Do thank your child for trusting you with their feelings.

5. Don't make your child's feelings wrong.
6. Don't blame your child for what they're feeling.
7. Don't ridicule your child for what they're feeling.
8. Don't ask your child to justify what they're feeling.
9. Don't ignore what your child is feeling.
10. Don't punish your child for what they're feeling.

Write down in the space below how you can validate your child's feelings.