

Chapter 3

Connectivity Between Child and Parent



*If there's love within the family, people can feel safe and secure
and know they are valued.*

-Stanley Phillips

Another way to influence your child's choices about the consumption of alcohol and other drugs is to build a close, supportive relationship. Research shows that teens are much more likely to delay consuming alcohol and other drugs when they feel they have a close, supportive tie with a parent. Studies reveal that teenagers who report feeling close to their families were the least likely to engage in risky behavior such as drinking and smoking marijuana or cigarettes. This finding supports what a majority of parents believe: that they can teach their children to view alcohol and other drugs as a serious concern and influence their children's decisions about whether or not to use drugs.

The opposite is also true. When the relationship between a parent and teen is full of conflict or very distant, the teen is more likely to consume alcohol and other drugs and develop drinking and drugging-related problems. This connection between the quality of the parent-child relationship and a child's drinking and drugging habits makes a lot of sense when you think about it. First, when children have a strong bond with a parent, they are apt to feel good about themselves and therefore be less likely to cave in to peer pressure to use alcohol and other drugs. Second, a good relationship with you is likely to influence your child to try to live up to your expectations, because they want to maintain their close tie with you.

Child Trends' Research Brief, *Building A Better Teenager: A Summary of "What Works" in Adolescent Development*, pulls together the key findings across a broad spectrum of research

to determine the factors that promote positive adolescent development. Their findings reinforce the importance of the quality of the child-parent bond. The following are findings based on an extensive review of research studies done in partnership with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

- 1) Parent/child relationships are key to the emotional and physical well-being of children. In addition, strong relationships with siblings, peers, and other adults in their communities can influence teens' choices and attitudes.
- 2) Supportive relationships trump lectures that simply tell teens to do or not to do something as a strategy to enhance adolescent development.
- 3) Teens should be treated as whole people, not just as students, patients, or delinquents.
- 4) Teens should be viewed as positive members of their communities, not merely as problems needing to be solved.

How can you create the type of connectedness between you and your child that will serve as a preventive influence in regards to consuming alcohol and other drugs? Here are a few ideas from my book, *Ask Dr. Steve . . . How Can I Build a Great Relationship with My Children?* First, at the heart and soul of a warm, supportive connection with your child is the *fulfillment of his emotional needs*. When you feel lost, when you feel like you're at your wits end, when you feel like you have nowhere else to go with your child, return to this page, this paragraph, this premise. *Your child desperately needs you.*

There's so much that he needs from you. *Involvement*—connecting with your child is an active process that never takes

a day off. *Acceptance*—she needs to feel the warmth of your forgiveness as she experiments with learning who she is. *Openness*—he needs a shoulder to lean on when life becomes overwhelming. *Accountability*—she needs to discover *The Law of Congruence*, namely, that her words and actions must match. *Discipline*—he needs you to tell him how far is too far. *Commitment*—she needs to trust that you’ll be there for her through thick and thin. *Love*—it’s his drug of choice.

There are two dimensions involved in meeting your child’s emotional needs. I refer to these two dimensions as your child’s *seeking spirit* and your *offering spirit*. Your child’s seeking spirit is the very human desire to have her emotional needs fulfilled. These emotional needs are the *goodies* she receives through the manifestation of your offering spirit. Think of these goodies as nutrients—they’re what enables her to feel acknowledged, validated, affirmed, and loved. These goodies come in all shapes and sizes. Appreciation, attention, belonging, love, nurturance, trust, and understanding are but a few of the needs that your child is seeking to have fulfilled by you.

Your offering spirit is the energy within you that extends toward your child in order to fulfill her emotional needs. You experience the essence of this energy as feelings of love and responsibility for her well-being. This energy appears in all the ways you express your love and sense of responsibility for her emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. It’s like the telephone commercial, your offering spirit is the energy you tap into when you *reach out and touch somebody*. Just how do you reach out and touch your child with your offering spirit?

Bridge Builder's Checklist

How to fulfill your child's emotional needs.

- 1) Accept your child for who they are rather than punish them for who they are not.
- 2) Normalize your child's feelings.
- 3) Validate your child's feelings.
- 4) Honor rather than argue with your child's feelings.
- 5) Create a climate of open communication.
- 6) Speak without offending and listen without defending.
- 7) Encourage your child's emotional growth and development.
- 8) Be a safe person for your child to test their limits.
- 9) Don't personalize your child's words and deeds.
- 10) Focus on your child's behavior rather than your child's personality.

These simple acts of love are what create and nurture the link between you and your child. For more specific information about the above list be sure to read *Ask Dr. Steve . . . How Can I Build A Great Relationship With My Children?*

A second rule of thumb in building a strong, nurturing relationship with your child is to *establish a climate of emotional safety*. Simply put, 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 a strong, nurturing connection. It's just that simple, it's just that black and white.

There's only one way I know to create a climate of trust and safety. *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 that she can feel anchored to. Experiencing you as emotion-

ally safe provides the necessary grounding for your child to trust you.

Can you see how trust is such an important element of emotional safety? You see it's not enough to encourage your child to reach out to you, to speak what's on his mind. You need to demonstrate 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 tender connection. How best to insure that your child doesn't feel judged or abandoned? We're right back to where we started—*responding* rather than *reacting*. It's an absolute must!

Just how do you respond rather than react to your child's feelings? There's a very simple skill that you can develop. I refer to this skill as *speaking to your child's feelings rather than arguing with their beliefs*. Speaking to your child's feelings is a gift of compassion and concern. Speaking to your child's feelings demonstrates that you're connected to what your child is experiencing at the soul of their being. Linking yourself to your child's emotions rather than locking horns with his belief system expresses that you're more interested in who they are rather than trying to shape what they should believe.

Focusing on your child's feelings rather than engaging their belief system elevates any discussion you have with him. You transform the battleground of who's right and who's wrong into a discussion of how you understand what your child is experiencing. It lets him know that he need not fear a battle of wits with you. More importantly, it provides an opportunity for him to experience your warmth and love.

Talking to your child's feelings is an act of profound communication. Talking to your child's feelings is an act of acknowledgement. Acknowledgment is the essence of what

you have to offer your child. Talking to your child's feelings is the most powerful and genuine manifestation of your offering spirit. It's like turning up the setting of your offering spirit to twelve on a scale of one to ten. In so doing, you're pouring all of your energy of love and affection into your child.

The act of speaking to your child's feelings accomplishes more than acknowledging what you understand about what he's experiencing. Speaking to your child's feelings helps clarify for him what it is that he's feeling. Do not underestimate the importance of this to your child's emotional well-being. Simply put, *your child needs you to help him become aware of what he's feeling, and clarify what he's feeling, so that ultimately, he's able to express what it is that he's feeling.*

For more specific information about how to speak to your child's feelings, be sure to read chapter 5 of my book, *Ask Dr. Steve . . . How Can I Build a Great Relationship with My Children?*

A final way to build a strong, nurturing relationship with your child is to affirm who your child is as a person by *validating what your child is feeling*. 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 is 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 her your willingness to see the world through her 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 she is as a thinking, feeling, human being. When I share this sentiment with people, I oftentimes get blank stares. Other times people argue the point with me. I am often asked how can I just sit there and 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 all about how your child's perception of a situation makes her feel, not about your evaluation of how that situation *should* make her 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 her out to be right or wrong or you can engage her 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 she thinks or feels. She only wants you to listen to what she is experiencing in order to support her efforts to overcome the obstacle(s) that's in her path.

As I end this chapter, let me state the obvious—skillful parenting can by no means be condensed into three simple rules of thumb. At the same time, don't underestimate the importance of what we've discussed in this chapter. Keep the following in mind:

- Be mindful of your child's emotional needs—trust me, they are.
- Respond to rather than react to your child's feelings—believe me, they're desperate for you to do so.
- Validate rather than argue with your child's feelings. Nobody—absolutely nobody—wants to be argued out of what they're feeling.

Bridge Builder's Checklist

Ways to build a strong emotional bond with your child.

- 1) Fulfill your child's emotional needs.
- 2) Create an emotionally safe environment for them to express themselves.
- 3) Talk to rather than argue with your child's feelings.
- 4) Validate your child's feelings.
- 5) Create an atmosphere of mutual respect.
- 6) Defuse power struggles and conflict.
- 7) Set limits.
- 8) Apply consequences when rules are violated.
- 9) Provide consistency.
- 10) Expect and create accountability for behavior.
- 11) Encourage your child's emotional development.
- 12) Enrich your child's emotional well-being.

- 13) Establish a rapport of encouragement and support.
- 14) Establish an effective style of communication.
- 15) Create a bridge of understanding.
- 16) Protect your child from the behavioral health risks associated with growing up.

