

# Gentle Connection

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This book is dedicated to all the single parents who despite their own struggles continue to try to do what is best for their children. They are the true heroes.

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## Introduction

Until someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better, it's not. – The Lorax, Theodore Giesel (Dr. Suess)

We live in a dangerous, scary world. Most kids are lucky enough to be sheltered from the worst of it. Unfortunately, for far too many the world is a confusing and scary place. This book is dedicated to the kids of the world who are marginalized and hurting, for any reason, and to the ordinary people who give their own time and energy to try to serve them. If we want to change the direction of society, we all need to step in and do our part. It cannot be acceptable for one child to fall through the cracks. We need to develop the Gentle Connections needed to help the healing begin.

"I don't want your sympathy for the needs of humanity, I want your muscle." – Robert Folghum (author of Everything I Need to Know I learnt in Kindergarten)

The statistics can't be ignored. According to DoSomething.org ([www.dosomething.org/tipsandtools/1-facts-about-child-abuse](http://www.dosomething.org/tipsandtools/1-facts-about-child-abuse)) 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will be sexually abused before age 17.

Child Help ([www.childhelp.org](http://www.childhelp.org)) reports these further disturbing statistics: A report of child abuse is made every 10 seconds.

Almost five children die every day as a result of child abuse.

It is estimated that 60-85% of child fatalities due to maltreatment are not recorded as such on the death certificates.

Over 60% of people in drug rehabilitation centers reported being abused or neglected as a child.

About 30% of abused and neglected children will later abuse their own children, continuing the horrible cycle of abuse.

About 80% of 21-year olds that were abused as children met criteria for at least one psychological disorder.

Abused children are 25% more likely to experience teen pregnancy.

The statistics clearly tell us that you don't need to work in a crisis shelter to encounter kids in need. If you are a Sunday school teacher, day care worker, camp counselor, scout leader or active in any community group where children are present; you, most likely, encounter children in crisis. While there is no magic solution to all the issues, we can do our best to serve the kids put in our path for the times they are with us. These children need Gentle Connections, nurtured when times are good, so they have safe places to fall when things are not.

Paul Tough, in the book 'How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character' describes the correlation between traumatic childhood events and children's success later in life. He also noticed that, even though the odds were against them, some children still managed to succeed. When he looked further, he found that the difference in the children that succeeded was the presence of at least one adult with a strong, calm connection. In the pages to follow we hope to explore how we can create and nurture those connections with the children we encounter. We can help improve the odds for the children in our care.

We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say 'It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes. - Fred "Mr." Rogers

## Chapter 1 – Even Me

As a child I had a severe stutter (compounded with being small and not very athletic). It was not the occasional vocal stumble like J-j-jimmy Stewart (those of us old enough to remember him) but the kind of stutter where you were happy if two or three words in a row came out normally. Kids can be cruel, so I spent the better part of my grade school years trying to fade into the back of the class and avoid being called on or speaking. Anyone who was a stutterer can relate to the fact that the more you try not to stutter the more you do. The two words most stumbled over are 'I' and 'me'. These are words that draw attention to yourself. As you can imagine, this did a number on my self-confidence.

I can still remember those adults that took the time to reach out. It would have been easy to overlook the quiet kid, but their small acts of kindness still resonate today. A special thank-you to Sister Francis, Ms. Smith, Father Wagman and Sister Elma. Each of them had an impact on me. In their presence I felt seen and valued. If you asked them, they would probably all think they did nothing special, but they would be wrong. They were each being themselves; encouraging every child, even those easy to ignore. Every day, by our actions or inactions, we impact those around us. We need to be intentional about making our interactions positive ones.

As a side note, if you know someone who stutters the best advice, I can give is to not draw attention to it by finishing their words for them. Let them finish. Do not tell them to slow down or calm down. No matter how well intentioned, this only makes them more aware and will, most likely, have the opposite effect. I once read a great quote (do not know the source) No one in the history of calming down has ever calmed down because they were told to calm down.

This experience developed in me a sense of empathy for the outcast and a heart for broken and hurting children. As I grew that heart led me to help start a church camp for children with special needs (that I served at for 20 years). While my confidence grew as I got older, I still had trouble picturing me being used like the great men in the Bible stories I would share at camp or Sunday school. I couldn't see myself as a world changer like Moses, Joshua, or David. I would never part the Red Sea, see the walls of Jericho fall or slay Goliath.

That changed one year at camp with the help of Cate. Cate was a cute little 10-year-old with Cerebral Palsy. She could not walk, had some use of her arms, and could talk in short, forced breaths. When she arrived, I sat with Cate while her counselor and parents moved her things into her cabin. I calmly talked to her about the fun things that would happen at camp and promised her that we were looking out for her. Her apprehension quickly turned to smiles. The hard "D" in Dan was too difficult for her so I became "Him". When she needed help, and someone else went to help her, you would often here her say "No, him help me". We quickly developed a Gentle Connection. You have really been hugged when you are hugged by little arms that struggle to lift to hug you.

One night I was laying in my cabin when I heard someone knock and enter. It was a counselor from Cate's cabin. She said Cate was really crying and they didn't know why. They knew we had a connection and hoped I could help. I got up and headed over.

The difficult thing about dealing with kids with speech difficulty is that when they are upset it is impossible to figure out what is wrong. First you must get them to calm down, then begin the process of finding the issue. I could hear her crying before I even entered the cabin. I entered and gently scooped the little crying girl up in my arms and held her close. By the time we reached the door the wail was down to a cry. By the time we sat on the rocking chair on the porch the cry was down to a sob. I held her close and talked softly to her. In a few minutes, before we could even figure out what was wrong, she was asleep in my arms.

It was then I was reminded of the Sunday School stories I would tell and felt like I heard a voice saying “I didn’t need you to part the Red Sea because I perfectly made and perfectly prepared Moses for that. I didn’t need you to see the walls of Jericho crumble because I perfectly made and perfectly prepared Joshua for that. I didn’t need you to slay Goliath. I perfectly made and perfectly prepared David for that. But for this night, in the hills of central Pa, for this little girl, I perfectly made and perfectly prepared you for that.”

I realized that if I could go back in time and relive my childhood as the star athlete or eloquent class president, but it meant that on this night, this little girl would not have found comfort in my arms; I would decline the offer. God’s plan is perfect even if we can’t see it. God can use “even me” and “even you”. All our experiences make us who we are. It is our challenges and successes that shape us and help make us into who we become.

I have spent many years working with children, like Cate, from many situations and from diverse backgrounds. For 20 years, I was a counselor at a week-long overnight camp for children with special needs. No matter how many years I went to camp one thing remained constant. I always left feeling like something special was given to me, not the other way around. I took seriously the awesome responsibility I saw behind the love and trust in the eyes of the campers. I can only hope they got a small percentage of what I did. I am not the same person that stepped onto those campgrounds over 30 years ago. Because of the people, campers and counselors, I had the privileged of spending time with each summer I am a better person. I have been taught the real meaning of courage, perseverance, and unconditional love. I have been shown a standard I can only hope to one day live up to. I am deeply indebted to each of them for that.

To me being a counselor at a camp for children with special needs is:

...little arms that barely work struggling to lift up to give you a hug

...watching with pride as your camper struggles and accomplishes what to most of us would be an everyday task

... being King to a Princess, even if the kingdom only lives in the Princess’ imagination

... looking into the eyes of the boy with Cerebral Palsy, totally dependent upon you for care, and seeing nothing but trust looking back

... being buddy to the boy used to being made fun of, or even worse, ignored

... hearing a little voice force out “Him help me” and knowing you are the him being requested

... being part of a family with a common goal accomplishing something greater than the sum of our individual parts

... rocking a nervous little girl, not used to being away from home, to sleep in your arms and her finding comfort there

... seeing the tears in the eyes of the parent of the severely handicapped child as they explain how they sat by the phone all week expecting the call that we couldn’t keep their child any longer , and the relief they felt when the call didn’t come

... helping catch a first fish, row a first boat or swim in a lake  
... rediscovering the joy in chasing frogs and jumping in mud puddles  
... the tear on your cheek as you perform the hardest task of the week, saying good-bye  
... never looking at the world or people the same way again  
... letting God use us and all of our weakness and frailty, to be his hands and feet and recognizing him in the hands and feet of those he sends to help us.

At various churches I have taught Sunday School and led support groups for children in crisis and children going through divorce. I have learned a lot from the other volunteers and by interacting with the children in my care.

For the last 14 years I have worked at a center for at risk families providing emergency and respite care for children ranging in age from birth to six. The goal of the center is to intervene with the families before something bad happens; to provide extra support to help prevent a crisis. We are stand ins for the children's extended family. We are the aunts, uncles and grandparents that the families do not have. Many of these kids call me Pop-pop, Poppy, Tito or Uncle Dan – names that show the children have a sense of familiarity and connection.

In this book I hope to share some of the stories and lessons I have learned in my decades walking alongside these children and their families. The biggest lesson I hope to share is that the power of Gentle Connection is what leads to true growth. No matter the background or issues; children are desperate for connection. Children want what we all want: someone to listen, empathize and understand. We can follow a program “by the book” and apply all the suggestions and rules but without Gentle Connection our successes may be limited. Connection is more important than control. The first step to any real progress is establishing that Gentle Connection.

You may never know what results come of your actions, but if you do nothing, there will be no results – Mahatma Gandhi

## **Chapter 2 – Case Study: She needed her Pop pop**

There was a family that came to the center for help. The mother had three young children and used the center for respite (a break from daily stress). One evening a violent crime occurred in their house while the children were home. As if this was not stressful enough, a few months later, in an unrelated incident, the mother ended up in jail. The children were taken in by a well-intentioned, but overwhelmed, Grandmother.

The Grandmother remembered how the children loved coming to the center, so she called and asked for help. I knew the children were coming in, and since I already had a Gentle Connection with them, I made sure I was there when they arrived. I looked through the window into the lobby and saw the oldest child. She looked lost and sad; a five-year-old with bags under her eyes. It was hard to recognize the happy child we always knew. When I walked in the lobby she got up, slowly walked over, climbed up in my arms, whispered “I miss Mom” in my ear, put her head on my shoulder and cried. I held her tight and told her it was okay to cry and to let it out. I looked over at Grandma and she was crying. She said it was the first time the little girl let herself cry for her Mom since Mom “left”. She needed her Pop-pop (me). The center was the place she felt safe

enough to cry and where she felt enough connections that she knew she could let her guard down a little and let someone else, who she trusted, help carry some of her burden. I'm glad that person was me. I strongly believe that what I did for her anyone with a heart for children could have done. Before the crisis, create a Gentle Connection (a safe place to fall). That Gentle Connection created a safe harbor for when she needed it.

We could help those kids during this crisis because of the Gentle Connections we had already made. It is great when we can fall back on well-established connections. What we do during the calm times pays dividends during the rough times. The investments we make during the easy times can be cashed in during a crisis.

Sometimes children come to us, for the first time, when they are already experiencing crisis. It is more important with those children to be careful how we gently build that connection. While they may want connection, they may also be fearful and hesitant. We may not know the history that brought them to where they are, so we may need to proceed cautiously. We will explore ways to establish this Gentle Connection in the next chapter.

How do we know that we have made this connection? Children won't specifically say that they have made a connection but will let you know in their words and actions. Like the little girl who would sleep with my hat so I couldn't leave while she was napping. She would hug it tight and say "When I wake up you will be here and you will love me" or the child who whispered in my ear "No one at home ever picks me up, you are the only one who ever holds me" or the child who says "My Daddy is in prison again, but at least I have you". We know we don't replace missing parents in their lives, but we can provide a piece of the support the children are missing. Each of the children mentioned above recognized, in their own way, that we had established that Gentle Connection. That Gentle Connection can not only provide a safe harbor when times are bad but also open up the children to grow into healthier adults who know how to trust others.

### **Chapter 3 – Steps to Connection**

I have developed a simplified version of steps to connection that applies to children in crisis. This version reflects many years of observing and interacting with children. I have noticed a distinct pattern that appears in many children. The steps are Survival Needs - Safety - Physical Needs - Emotional Needs - Growth. Each child needs to pass thru the prior step to get to the next. In reality, growth occurs as children pass thru every level but real growth, less hindered by past bad experiences, occurs when the other issues have been addressed.

Initially I started the steps with safety as the lowest level. I assumed that most children's basic needs are being met (basic food, clothing and shelter). But, unfortunately, this is not always true. Therefore, I put the foundational need as basic survival needs. Hunger, thirst and shelter are necessary for survival. If these needs are not met a child cannot move forward. We would like to believe that there are not children in our area without steady food, shelter and clothing. If we look beyond our own bubbles, beyond our own little worlds, we will see that this is not true. Food insecurity and unstable housing are very common issues even in developed countries. If a child is cold or hungry that will be the overwhelming need that must be met before any progress

can occur. If you are not sure where your next meal is coming from or if you will have a safe place to lay your head and sleep those concerns will demand all your energy and attention.

I learned this lesson in one of my first weekends at the center. I was having a good morning with the kids. We were all laughing and being silly. Then I messed up. I was bringing the children's breakfast from the kitchen. One by one giving them their plates of bacon, toast and eggs. When I got to the last child; I jokingly, sat beside him and put his plate in front of me. I pretended like I was going to eat his breakfast. I thought he would laugh, but instead he crossed his arms on the table and put his head down. He didn't laugh, cry or even complain. He was going to accept the fact that he wasn't going to get breakfast and this adult (me) was going to eat his breakfast in front of him. It broke my heart. I have learned that we must have some awareness of the backgrounds of the children we serve and if we don't, we need to proceed with caution. I believe silliness is a tool we can use in developing connections but we also need to be aware that some jokes should be off limits. We don't want jokes to hurt our connections.

If a child's base survival needs are met, the first thing a child needs is to feel safe. This safety is often found by the child making a Gentle Connection with a caregiver. Some children come to us from stable homes and that makes our job easier, but many don't and that makes our actions more important. The first thing we need to do is determine a child's level of uneasiness so we can then determine how to approach them. A forced interaction can be worse than no interaction at all.

Normal uneasiness can usually be overcome by a calm voice explaining the new situation and letting the child become comfortable in their surroundings. As caregivers our job is to be an approachable safety net. Instead of pushing them into new situations it is better to let them know they can stay near us until they are comfortable. They will want to join the fun when it no longer looks scary.

When I was a camp counselor, I would let new campers explore the camp surroundings at their pace. I would act as a guide to keep them safe in their explorations. At the crisis shelter I let new children know I am there but let them set the pace, getting comfortable at their speed.

Either we spend time meeting children's emotional needs by filling their cup with love or we spend time dealing with the behaviors caused from their unmet needs. Either way we spend the time. – Pam Leo

What does a child searching for safety look like? The fear can show itself in many ways, but you can be assured it will show itself. Typically, a child affected by crisis will often exhibit one of three traits: fight, flight, or shut down.

In fight mode they are, literally, willing to take on anyone. They are used to fighting and scrapping for survival. We had a little boy come into the center and he had a stern, tough, argumentative attitude. He was not letting anyone close and would argue and fight if anyone tried. One of the staff even nick named him "Scrappy". He thought he needed to keep everyone at a distance then no one could hurt him.

Sometimes fight is not just physical fighting but also an angry, stubborn attitude. A child will try to keep everyone at an emotional distance by angrily responding to any attempts to get close.

They will be happy to go about their day keeping to themselves or grabbing and pushing to get what they want. As their fight reaction diminishes, they will agree to let others 'in' one at a time as they feel safe.

There was a boy at the center that was very defensive and always ready to fight. I worked hard over his visits to model calm responses and let him know that he was safe to let his guard down. I would try to show him better ways to show his emotions without excusing his current behaviors. Over time we developed a Gentle Connection and he became more open to interaction without the defensiveness. He had let me in (at least some). We had a really good time and he had a day without any meltdowns or tantrums.

When the next shift came in (and a caregiver he was not familiar with) I complimented him (in front of the other staff, because I thought it would benefit him to hear the praise being shared with others). Instead of smiling proudly, he turned to the new staff, made an angry face and growled. While he had let me in, he was not ready to let the new staff in. He was letting her know it. He needed her to prove she was trustworthy. Making the first Gentle Connection doesn't mean all walls will crumble but making that first connection should make the next ones easier.

What Do You Do With the Mad That You Feel?  
Copyright 1968 Fred M. Rogers

What do you do with the mad that you feel?  
When you feel so mad you could bite?  
When the whole wide world seems oh so wrong  
And nothing you do seems right?

What do you do?  
Do you punch a bag?  
Do you pound some clay or some dough?  
Do you round up friends for a game of tag?  
Or see how fast you go?

It's great to be able to stop  
When you've planned a thing that's wrong  
And be able to do something else instead

In flight mode their first instinct is to run away or hide. They are afraid of trusting adults and fear for their well-being. When we encounter children like this, we may have to guard any exits. Sometimes they won't literally run away but will hide in corners or as far away from the new adults as possible. They may try to make themselves invisible or try not to be noticed. Their "flight" may be more internal than physically running away.

As mentioned earlier, as a child I was very small and suffered from a severe stutter. Children can be cruel, and I spent a lot of time in my early school years trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Trying to blend into the background. I dreaded hearing my name called or being asked to talk. This type of "hiding" is a form of flight. It is trying to disappear by remaining unnoticed.

Shut down mode is the most alarming and the saddest to see. I have seen children fall on the floor and not move. On other occasions I have seen children walk into a new situation and lean against a wall and look down at the floor with a blank stare. They have given up and are ready to quietly accept whatever is about to happen.

Children in shut down mode have, most likely, already tried fight or flight with no success. A typical progression may be fight to flight then shutdown. The first reaction is to fight for your safety, to stand up for yourself. If the fighting seems futile the next step may be flight (running away). If the fight and flight are both ineffective the only response may be to shut down (give up). If children see they can't fight and flight is useless they may jump right to shut down.

## **Chapter 4 – Making the Gentle Connection**

The root cause of the actions in the previous chapter is the same (fear) and the basic principal to address is the same (Gentle Connection). If I observe any of these behaviors, I will be careful to not overwhelm the child. From a distance I will let the child know who I am and talk about the fun we can have. I will try to show with my words and actions that they are safe. Children seem to quickly respond to calm, safe people. If they act fearful, we need to stay calm and consistent. We need to make sure we are approachable and safe. We are constantly being observed and we need to know what message any of our actions are showing.

This book is directed toward average people trying to serve these children. Because we are not professionals, we may encounter issues beyond our education and experience. Some issues may need the help of trained professionals. It's okay to admit that some issues are deeper than we can handle. Hopefully we can direct these children to the trained professionals they need. We can also be a piece of the solution. We can continue to provide a safe haven set up by our Gentle Connections.

It also helps if the children can see you interact with other children in a positive way. Sometimes kids take minutes, hours, or even days to get over the fear. We must learn that each of our actions are being observed and therefore important. Fearful children will sit back and watch. They may even laugh or smile at your interactions with other children but still not be ready to open up themselves. These laughs and smiles are steps in developing that connection. We need to be careful not to put a time limit on their response. I have had kids run up to me just because they see other kids run up and others sit back for hours / days until they are comfortable. We don't know the entire history that got them to the point they are at so we shouldn't expect instant success.

I set limits for safety but never in a loud or angry way. It is important to never even appear to use physical intimidation. Gentle Connection must be maintained. When we start to gain that trust it is an awesome responsibility to not damage that progress. I take the looks of love and trust I see in the children's eyes very serious. We must be that safe harbor. The length of time it takes for us to reach them is often determined by how much trauma they have endured or their history of interactions (good or bad) with other care givers. We can also set back many positive interactions with one bad one. If our response, unintentionally, triggers a memory of past trauma it may set back our Gentle Connection.

There was a boy who saw violence by his father in his house. He started acting out and showing aggression toward children and staff. I also noticed that if I made a mad face or raised my voice he would start crying and curl up. He was always ready to fight other kids but would shut down around adults.

One time when he was showing signs of aggression toward another child. I quickly removed him from the situation. When we were separate from the other kids he looked up at me and said "My Dad gets angry too". This created a difficult situation. Our priority is, always, the safety of all the children, but I was also concerned about helping the child deal with his issues. I had a conversation with him and in simple terms let him know that no one here will hurt him, but he could not hurt others either. I told him that when he acted mean to other kids, he and I would have to leave the room where the other kids were. By making clear rules and repercussions I would not need to raise my voice or act physically intimidating. When these behaviors started to appear I would take his hand and we would leave the room until things calmed down. He understood the rules and I could hold him accountable and keep the other kids safe without yelling or being physically intimidating. He knew that he was being removed from the group because of his actions but he also knew that I was not going to hurt him. None of this would have worked if I had not made a Gentle Connection with him.

I wish I could remove the memories from children who have experienced things they should never have experienced. I wish I could always protect them from those that would hurt them, especially from those who are supposed to care for them. I can't do that, but I can try to help show them that some people can be trusted. I can rock them to sleep and let them find safety and comfort in my presence. I can try to provide a Gentle Connection where they are safe.

Our services at the center include overnight respite. If I am arriving first thing in the morning, and there are new kids, I have developed a routine. We have two bedrooms, each with multiple beds and cribs. I will walk in calmly and sit in the rocking chair that we have in each room. The chair is centrally located and not too close to any child. I will sit and calmly talk about what the day will be like and the fun things we will do. Usually I will have new friends before we walk out into the dining area. If they are still leery then I hope that I have begun to lay the groundwork that will lead to a Gentle Connection. I will not push their reaction but will calmly interact and listen to their stories. Some caution around new people is healthy and should be encouraged. Each child has different needs. The speed and closeness of the connection should always be driven by the child.

Many of our repeat overnight visitors at the center have developed their own routine. They will be back in the bedrooms listening for the overnight staff to leave. When they hear the door close, they will all come out knowing the daytime staff is waiting for them. The overnight staff (to them nighttime teachers) know a good night's sleep is important. Therefore, their main job is to get the kids back to bed when they wake up. When they know the overnight staff is gone, and someone is there they have a Gentle Connection with, they will start wandering out of the bedrooms. Often heading right for the day staff's arms for morning greetings and cuddles. This may be my favorite part of the day.

There was a two-year-old at the center who was, obviously, afraid of me. She would cry if I got near and ask for someone else to help her. It may have been because I was the only male

caregiver (but couldn't be completely sure). I gave her all the space she needed. I would talk to her calmly, from a distance but did not force or impose. She was a repeat visitor to the center, so I saw her semi-frequently over a period of months. I did notice her getting less and less apprehensive. One day I was standing in the playroom when I felt a tug at my leg. I looked down and it was her. She was asking me to help her. She finally decided to trust me and that I could help her. Things changed after that and she grew more and more comfortable with me (at her pace). We made that connection at her speed. She moved past safety and now was asking for help.

No child is born filled with hate. No child is born crippled by fear. No child is born inflamed by rage. Each life is a chance to make things better. Each generation has a chance to do things better. This is our time, our turn, our chance. Let's do better. – L.R. Knost

After children feel safe, they need to know their physical needs will be met. They must be assured that if they are hungry, they will be fed, thirsty given a drink, tired shown a safe place to rest or sad will be comforted. The difference between my definition of physical needs and survival needs is the difference between a starving or malnourished child (survival needs) and a child that missed breakfast and is now hungry for lunch (physical needs). We need to be aware of children's needs and meet them with calm compassion.

I remember one little guy who was quick to fall into shut down mode. Fortunately, he and I quickly made a connection. He felt safe with me and knew his physical needs would be met but was still emotionally unstable. When someone new walked in the room he would curl up on the floor and lay there not talking or moving. I don't know what trauma led him to react that way, but it was heart-breaking to see.

I take seriously the responsibility when children decide to trust me. One night a child who would shut down was sitting in his bed (usually I would sit on a rocking chair near the bed until the kids fell asleep) when I left the room to take care of an issue. When I came back, I heard a soft whisper "Pop Pop where are you? Pop Pop where are you?". He still needed my presence at bedtime to feel at ease and able to sleep.

The most common nickname I have at the center is Pop-pop (closely followed by Poppy and Uncle Dan). It shows the kids have a sense of comfort and familiarity. I proudly accept the name. Once I walked out of the room and I heard the kids arguing over who's Pop-pop I was. Each felt they were the most important and had the strong connection. We have succeeded if we can make each child feel that they are important to us. It is funny to reflect on the evolution of how the children view me. When I first started going to camp (in my early 20's) some of the girl campers said they wanted to marry me. As time went on that evolved into them saying they wished I was their Dad. Now, the kids at the center call me Pop-pop. I am content with that evolution.

I have often had debates on whether it is good to sit with kids until they fall asleep. Some fear this will spoil them and get them to expect your presence. I strongly disagree, meeting kids' basic emotional needs creates confident, secure children not spoiled ones. Children need us until they feel safe and connected enough to be on their own. Children become bolder when they are comfortable and know that they are safe. I have seen this proven over and over. Children become more confident when they know someone will be there if needed.

After we have made the connection and ensured the child's physical needs are met, we can then try to meet their emotional needs. We should approach every interaction with children with loving compassion. We must approach each step of the day – waking up, brushing teeth, combing hair, serving meals with attention, calmness, and understanding. When a child feels loving interaction instead of being treated as a chore it increases their self-worth and confidence.

When children realize they can vocalize their needs and not be yelled at, ridiculed or ignored they are more likely to express those needs in a healthy way. I have seen many children who start out fearful and emotional. Overtime, the children become more confident and less fearful with those that recognize their feelings and help them feel more confident. Punishing a child for crying or showing emotion may, temporarily, force the child to suppress their feelings. Acknowledging their feelings and helping them feel safer may require more compassionate action on our part but will, in the long run, result in less issues later. When children fear being ridiculed, yelled at or ignored they will act out in other ways. Children who need love the most ask for it in the most unloving of ways.

I have had many discussions about “tough love” and “spoiling”. Intimidating or coercing children into behaving may make our jobs, temporarily, easier but is counterproductive in the long run. Leaving babies to “self soothe” only teaches them that if they cry no one's coming. The most well-adjusted kids are ones that know if they need help there is someone to lean back on. What is our goal? If it is to get thru the day then controlling behavior works. If it is to make healthy children, then we need to build relationships and meet needs.

Interestingly, Paul Tough also notes a study that was done on Rats (not that I am comparing children to rat's). They watched how mother rats interacted with their babies. Some mother rats were more attentive and nurturing. As the baby rats grew, they put them in different situations. The rats with attentive nurturing mothers were more confident and daring. They were more likely to confidently explore their environments. The rats that did not grow up in nurturing environments were timid and more cautious.

To make sure the behaviors were not inherited they switched babies at birth. Giving some babies from nurturing mothers to mothers who were less nurturing and less nurturing mothers' babies to more nurturing mothers. The results were the same. The amount of confidence displayed was the result of the nurturing mother's actions. Children (animals and humans) become more confident when they know they are supported and loved. I have decided that in my interactions I will always try to do what is right, but if unsure I will decide to err on the side of empathy and compassion.

## **Chapter 5 - Nurturing the Connection**

As a teacher, counselor, coach or any other caregiver our first goal should be to connect or reconnect with each child as early as possible. When I enter the center, I address each child. When I was as camp counselor, I made sure I talked to each camper every morning. If a strong connection already exists, the child will most likely initiate but if not a simple hello may be

enough. Other children may need reminded (by your smile and friendly greeting) and new children may need a more cautious approach. Each child will determine how slowly or quickly we can begin to reestablish that connection.

There are lots of good strategies and parenting hints that are useful “tools in the toolbox” but those tools are only fully affective when there is a Gentle Connection. Whether as a parent or caregiver making and nurturing that Gentle Connection is what is important. What we do during the “good” times is how we lay the foundation for what happens in the “tough” times. Connection is more important (and powerful) than control. When a child is truly overwhelmed, terrified or sad they will look for those they have Gentle Connections with for help.

Children need adults in their lives they can trust to hear and understand and help them. That trust is built in the little, ordinary moments, the mundane day-to-day interactions when we listen and support and encourage them. That trust is their lifeline when life gets too hard or confusing or scary for them to handle alone. – L.R. Knost

It is easy to say we should model in the big and small moments but what does this look like? One way is to check your attitude before the first interaction of the day. We have the power to set the mood for the day by setting our own attitude. Before kids wake up or arrive into our care we should make sure we have a positive attitude and expect the best. They will sense that and, often, we will get what we expect. When a child senses a positive and happy attitude their behaviors will often reflect that. Conversely, if they are greeted by a negative or apathetic attitude their behaviors will also reflect that. When I was a Sunday School teacher I would arrive early. I wanted to have all the curriculum organized, kids’ bible songs playing, and be ready for the kids when they arrive. At camp we would arrive the day before and be settled in and waiting when the kids arrive. At the center I try to find out before I arrive who is there so I can mentally prepare. I appreciate that my actions and attitude either help or hurt the connections I have created.

Children have this amazing way of becoming exactly who we tell them they are. If we tell them they are strong, they become strong. If we tell them they are kind, they become kind. If we tell them they are capable, they become capable. Speak life into your kids, so they will have what it takes to tackle their own life one day. – Amy Weatherly

Another step is to think about how you react to small issues. That helps build trust for big issues. We need to share our calm and not join the child’s inner chaos. It is important how we interact all day. With smaller children we need to be aware how we approach brushing hair, dressing, bathing and feeding. If we do these things in calm loving ways, we project that peace onto the children. If we do them in hurried, distracted ways we project that onto them.

One little five-year-old girl who I knew since she was a baby was at the center when we also had some smaller ones. She asked if I could just put the baby down. I told her that when she was a little she was my baby and I held her. She said “I still am.” She liked the security of our Gentle Connection.

How do we react to spilled milk or a grumpy child? Do we react with compassion and calm or overreact to simple mistakes (spilled milk wipes up)? We should also help come up with solutions to problems that need addressed instead of yelling or insulting. Sometimes the problems do need addressed but how we address them makes all the difference. We can’t think

of children as fully formed adults who have completely thought out their actions. They need to be able to make bad choices and live with the results with us helping to explain and guide instead of criticizing or ridicule.

9 times out of 10 the story behind the misbehavior won't make you angry. It will break your heart. – Annette Breaux

Children are growing and learning. Children, and adults, sometimes need to express their emotions without anger or ridicule. This includes being able to cry. Children don't stop crying as much when we shame or bully them into stopping. They stop when they feel safe and balanced. If we shame, bully or punish a child to stop crying it may appear as short-term success but that emotion will reemerge in some manner (either more crying or as anger). It is healthier to help the children to understand their emotions and deal with them (and sometimes a good cry is the way to deal with it). Sometimes all they need is for us to sit with them and quietly support them. Some days are just too overwhelming for their little selves and having us present may be exactly what they need.

People have said 'Don't cry' to other people for years and years and all it has ever meant is 'I'm too uncomfortable when you show your feelings' I'd rather have them say 'Go ahead and cry. I'm here to be with you.' – Fred "Mr" Rogers

When dealing with crying children these are some phrases that are not helpful:

- Don't be a baby
- Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about
- If you don't stop you can go to bed until you stop

Instead we should take a more empathetic approach and say things like:

- You must be really sad, it's okay to cry when we are sad
- Can I sit with you?
- Do you want to tell me about why you are sad? Can I help?

The first set of phrases may make the kids stop crying but only teaches them that their feelings are not valid and may cause them to suppress their feelings (though they will present themselves at a later date in some form). My years of trying to build Gentle Connections have taught me that kids don't stop crying as much when we shame or "bully" them into stopping. They stop crying as much when they feel safe. This is another opportunity to decide if we are trying to survive today (get them to stop the quickest way possible) or trying to build strong children who can deal with their feelings in healthy ways. Telling a child to stop crying or they will be punished or sent to bed may get them to temporarily stop. Treating them with kindness and empathy will give them the inner peace and connections to not to feel the need to cry as much. When we help kids identify their feelings, we can then help them manage and honor their emotions.

Another way to make children feel respected is to really listen when they talk. When a child talks to you they should feel like the most important person (at least for those moments in time). I take serious the power of making children feel loved and respected. Once I was doing an intake at the center for a child that had been there before. The mother told me that when she told the child she was coming back to the center she said, "Good because Mr Dan is at the center crying".

The mother asked the child why Mr. Dan was crying, and she answered, "Because I'm not there." She knew at the center she felt loved, respected and missed.

The kids connect and miss us too. One night I stopped in at the center and a little girl was there who had been there a few nights already. She asked me where I had been and told me she was sitting on the rocking chair alone waiting for me to come in and rock her. I asked her what she should do if I wasn't there (expecting her to say have them call me). She said she would cry.

Sometimes they might need us to do nothing more than sit cross legged on the floor for a while, because today had spikes, and it's softer and quieter down there. Sometimes that will be everything. - L.R. Knost

## **Chapter 6 - Case Study: Dandelions**

Dandelions are my favorite flower, Whenever I see a lawn chemical truck, or must mow over new dandelion flowers I feel a little sad. They remind me of Trisha.

I am a counselor at a camp for children with special needs and one of my goals is to talk to each of the campers every day. My goal is to nurture connections when things are calm. The time we spend investing in that connection will pay dividends if we must address any issues. We can then start with a level of trust and connection and not try to build or gain that during difficult situations. It has always been a policy of our camp to take any campers that would have trouble adapting to another camp. This means when you approach a new camper you are never sure what kind of response you will receive. We have had children who are deaf, blind, mute, and all different levels of physical, mental, and emotional handicaps. But no matter what challenges each camper has brought we have always adapted enough to try to make it a week of growth for everyone.

This year I noticed a new camper sitting with the group, but not interacting. I walked up and said "Hi, I'm Dan, what's your name?" She didn't answer but proudly showed me her name tag. I responded, "Hi Trisha, I'm glad you're here!"

I must have been the first one to talk to her because from that moment on whenever Trisha saw me, she was right by my side. She ate with us, went on hikes with us, and when we sat down for a rest she was right there.

Trisha was a cute little girl who happens to have Cerebral Palsy. She could walk, with a severe limp, and she could not talk. She had trouble with her muscle control and sometimes ate sloppily. But she could communicate with her smile and attitude. Every time you saw her there was a huge smile on her face. She was determined not to let the Cerebral Palsy hold her back.

On the first day of camp I saw Trisha struggle to bend over and pick up a yellow dandelion flower. My initial reaction was, we are in the woods, it's spring and there are all kinds of beautiful wildflowers blooming. Why would she want a dandelion? She took the yellow weed and put it in her coat pocket. Trisha flourished at camp. She loved the campers and the counselors and wanted to participate in all the activities and always with a great attitude.

After the week was over and parents were coming to pick the children up, I saw Trisha crying. I walked over to her; I was going to tell her that we would see her next year. But what she did when I approached her was more powerful than any words I could have used. She reached into her pocket, removed her prized, and by now slightly mutilated, dandelion and gave it to me.

Even if I had wanted to I could not have responded. I was choked up with tears. I took the dandelion and stuck it in my shirt pocket with the flower sticking out. To me it was more beautiful than any rose or carnation could have been.

Why do I love dandelions? Because they remind me of Trisha and all the other dandelions of the world. We all know them, and at times we have probably been one. They are the people who, when you see them, it is easy to turn your head and walk away. They are used to being ignored and don't expect attention. They are the handicapped, the old, the unpopular and the hurting. When you see a dandelion do you see a weed or a beautiful flower full of hopes and wishes?

It's easy to be nice to the popular, beautiful people. Everyone wants to wear a rose in their lapel. Everyone wants to be part of the "in" crowd. But we shouldn't just hang out with the roses and carnations, we should hang out with the dandelions. I choose to see beauty, hopes and wishes.

Dandelions, like all things in nature are beautiful when you take the time to pay attention to them.  
– June Stoyer

Let's see if today we can put dandelions in our lapels.

What lessons did I learn from my time with Trisha? We need to be deliberate in our attempts to develop connections. We should seek out those who seem alone (even amid a group), sometimes they just need a little confidence. Sometimes the best gifts are those given from the heart (like wilted dandelions) that would have little value to the world.

How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong, because someday you will have been all of these – George Washington Carver

## **Chapter 7 - Debunking Common Misconceptions**

Whether we recognize them or not, we all have beliefs and principals we base our decisions on. These may be based on our experiences. It is natural and dangerous to view issues from the lens of our experience. It is easy to fall into the trap of judging based on what we have experienced. We need these basic principles to guide us but we should also be open to reevaluate our beliefs if we see our ideas need adjustment. Below are some misconceptions that many people follow. I am not telling you to change because I say so. I am asking consideration of the ideas below and see if we can base our actions on strong principals. Over the years, I have grown in many ways and have altered my beliefs. I would hope we would all gain knowledge and experience as we age (not just add years). One of the biggest obstacles to creating Gentle Connections is holding onto these misconceptions.

Misconception 1: It was good enough for my parents it is good enough for me. This is a common misconception I often hear as justification for questionable actions. Most of our parents were not bad people. They used the tools they were taught and modeled to try to do the best they could. There was a time when whipping kids with a switch (maybe even making the child pick it out) was commonly accepted. Modern research and most child development experts would now agree this is not acceptable. We don't need to hurt children to instill discipline. This does not mean that our parents were evil; it just means that we now know better. Learning and growing in our own beliefs is not insulting or dishonoring our parents. We all hope that our children, or the children we have influence over, learn better ways than we know. When they do, they will hopefully do better than us. We should not want our children to feel guilty if they discover better ways than we knew. It is not dishonoring our parents to evolve our ways of thinking.

We do the best we know, but when we know better, we do better. – Maya Angelou

Misconception 2: That's what happen to me and I turned out okay. We are all "damaged". We all have our own set of "baggage" but we find ways to cope and survive. We all have our own triggers and insecurities we need to overcome. When I was a child, I had a stutter. I was also small and not very athletic. These made me an easy target. I still get feelings of insecurity when I stumble over words. This doesn't mean it rules my life it means that I have learned to manage those insecurities to try to let it not affect my actions. It is still "baggage" I carry. We need to find a way to send our kids into the world with the least amount of "baggage" we can. Just because we survived something and learned to cope doesn't mean we should inflict those same scars on other children.

Misconception #3: That's the way I've always done it. We should never be so stuck in old patterns or habits that we can't listen to other opinions. I have thought hard about my beliefs but one thing I do know is that I still have a lot to learn. This doesn't mean we should change every time we are confronted by someone with a strong opinion, but it does mean we should be open to listen. Whenever I start a new, established, situation I try to sit back and watch so I can observe what is working (or not working) and decide how I fit in with the things that are working or how I may be able to influence the things that aren't. When I started helping at the center I often worked with the same person. I learnt a lot from her and changed some of my opinions and behaviors by watching the way she dealt with the parents we serve. Conversely, I have a gentler approach to the children than she did. I did not feel I should change that. We all have different strengths and weaknesses and we can all learn from each other. I hope I am more thoughtful of how I do things now than I was thirty years ago.

Tony Robbins said it well: "If you do what you've always done you will get what you've always gotten" or Albert Einstein said it a bit more bluntly: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results". We must continually question our own methods and when we find a better way we should be open to change.

## **Chapter 8 - Burnout**

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