

## Reconnecting with a child in difficult times

*Sometimes, when life gets difficult, and the behaviour of children (or ourselves) falls apart, we can feel as if we are losing touch with each other, even losing our love for our child. Sometimes other circumstances separate us, like our work away from home or a marriage break-up, and the connection with the child feels broken. Sometimes, because of unresolved conflicts, an older child turns away from us.*

*These notes are reminders that there are things that can be done to reconnect with a child and to rebuild feelings of safety and care within your shared relationship. The key to all of this is to deepen your understanding of your child and to nurture a true unconditional love and respect for his or her individual spirit and destiny. Then with this understanding and love, to put care into everything you do for your child, to let that love be felt, deep in your heart.*

### Introduction

Genuine re-connection with another person, while feeling estranged from them, needs unconditional love and new understanding. It needs to come from a deep commitment and a willingness to put in effort for the other person. It cannot be bought with bribes or be conditional. You need to take it seriously and do it with the deepest level of commitment in your heart. Your child will sense your level of commitment and will not respond if they believe it is not genuine. However, your efforts must be freely given, without expectations of any return. This leaves the child free to respond to you, in their own time, in their own way when he or she is ready.

In more temporary feelings of estrangement, perhaps in the midst of the more difficult developmental stages, it may not take very much time to find warmth and healing again. However, in some more serious circumstances, like separation from the child in an acrimonious divorce, the rift may have been made too wide

for quick reconciliation and it will take patience and more time. In some instances, like a serious conflict with a teenager, reconciliation may not happen in the present time at all. Nevertheless we can do a certain amount to bring healing to our side of the relationship, to take responsibility for our part in the estrangement and keep alive our love for the best in our child. Then at least we know we have done what we can, and can only hope that time, which does heal many things when love is kept present, might bring another opportunity for healing the relationship one day.

But in all these circumstances, there are three things which are helpful to do to reconnect with children: firstly we need to find more understanding for our individual child and their situation; secondly, we can re-open the place in our heart for the child by reconnecting with our loving memories of that child; and thirdly we can identify what would make things better and start to put those things into place. Once again—

the key to all of this is to put unconditional love and care into everything you do for your child,

keeping an open heart as to what might come next.

## *Finding more understanding for your child.*

What is essential in all healthy relationships is that we really see the other person as an individual and appreciate that person for who he or she is, not what we want that person to be. Then in the case of a child, we need to understand his or her particular needs and see if they are being well met.

When times are difficult, children's needs are often not all met and they begin to show troubled behaviours. Children actually want to be good and to live up to their own moral code; we are essentially social creatures and prefer to help others. Therefore, most normal children who are showing troubling behaviour are not doing so with malicious intent but to get their needs met; for food, for enough sleep, for love and attention, to be recognised and empowered as an individual and so on. They need our understanding and compassion. Our task is to identify what they need and which of those needs might not be well met. Then, as we reconnect with the best in our child and feel gratitude for the gifts they bring us, we can try to meet their needs as best we can.

**What behaviours are developmental?** A good place to start to get to know our child again is to start with understanding developmental behaviours particular to their age. From these you can begin to see what is developmental and what is individual. See the age of your child in the *Developmental profiles*.

**Are there detrimental factors in the physical or emotional environment?** It is useful to consider whether there are factors in the environment which could be upsetting the harmony of your relationship with the child. What affects you, also affects the child. Can anything be done to

change these or do you have to just work with what is there?

Consider what has been challenging in the emotional environment for you and the child (stress, estranged adults, separation of a parent, absent parent, trouble at work for a parent, sickness, death, griefs of all sorts, threatened violence, lack of adult support for the parent, money problems etc.). What is aggravating the situation for the child? Any combination of big stressors can have an effect on children's health and behaviours. Can any of these things be changed? Can you get outside support to deal with any of them better? Acknowledgement of the problem can also sometimes bring change.

Also consider what may have been challenging in the physical environment for the child (noise, no play spaces, no nature places, strange house, new city. etc). Can any of these be changed?

**Are there unmet or misunderstood needs?** Has trouble and estrangement occurred because of unmet needs or misunderstandings with the child? Using the check lists in the *Avoiding trouble* series on your child's age group may help to identify where things have gone wrong and to find ways to do things differently.

**Who is your child as an individual?** Try to reconnect with who your child is an individual. Observe and describe them and recall the special moments you have shared together. Photos can help to trigger the memories. Remind yourself of how they are when they are their best selves, most centred, most together. What gifts do they bring into the world? What is special about them? How are they like you? How are they different? If you have been

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separated from your child, ask others to describe them to help you build a picture of them. Re-ignite your love for them. If it is just too hard to feel loving right now, then put love around an image which represents your child at their best.

It could help to write a description of your child if it helps you to concentrate on them. Describe them physically, their temperament, their likes, dislikes, their social relationships, their moral qualities. How do they act, think, feel, respond? How do they try to get their needs met? What are their abilities, strengths and potential areas

## Making changes

Start simply, mindfully, meditatively. Put love around your child in your imagination or when you are with them. Sitting by the bed when a child is asleep is a good way to start to love them again—they look most innocent at such moments. Especially put your love around your child last thing at night before you go to sleep. Take your loving thoughts of your child into your own sleep. Interesting things happen when you take your questions and good intentions into your sleep. Teachers who do this when working with a problem child, sometimes find the child is already changed the next morning. Similarly writing a therapeutic story for a child, involving as it does a great deal of thought and effort, can change the child's behaviour even before the child has heard the story. Sometimes you get inspirations on what you need to do about a problem on waking in the morning or during the day, so be mindful of this.

Put more love into the environment and everything you do for the child. Are there environmental factors you can change? Less noise, more order, more beauty, more unhurried time, more time doing things together, more time for free play, for fun with you, more time

of growth? What are they like when they are at their best?

Do anything that helps you to think about your child with gentleness and affection in an unhurried time frame. Call it a meditation on your child if you like. Go for a long walk to think about your child uninterrupted. (Phone turned off!) If you are creative you could do this artistically. Art takes us to a different place in our soul. You could make something for your child, a card, a doll, a toy, a story or a poem, or using any photos you have, draw, paint, make montages. But fill it all with love for the child.

in nature for the child? What would help? Reduce your stress. Drop things that do not absolutely have to be done. What do you need to do for yourself to be centred and caring? Do you need more sleep?

Most important of all, your child needs what I call 'sacred time' with you, a time (preferably every day at a time like this) where you can both be together uninterrupted, to share, to talk or do something together. Perhaps to start with, it might be best to do something together where it does not matter if you do not talk, like just taking the dog for a walk or going to the park to play. Just be cheerful company for each other. Phones need to be turned to silent, others need to be asked to respect your time together. The time does not have to be long, ten minutes may suffice sometimes, but it has to be taken seriously and respected by you. Bedtimes can be good for this, to share a few of the things that happened in the day. If your heart is really genuinely in it, these times show the child you really care.

Remember there are many ways to show your love for a child. Use them all. Words, a loving look. Loving touch can also be powerful.

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Respond wholeheartedly when your child comes to you for hugs, kisses or cuddles. If they do not ask for it in this way consider what other ways can you find to give them loving touch. Stroking their head as they lie in bed? Your arm behind their back as you sit beside them? If your child do not want to be touched in these ways, do not force it on them. You may find however, that they still enjoy a good piggy back ride, or foot or back massage. Children who are particularly sensitive to touch will be the most resistant if they do not trust you or are angry etc. However, they are also the ones who will respond most positively if, in the moments where they do want it, you are able to recognise this and show your love through appropriate touch.

When we lose connection with and understanding of someone, we are often more likely to be more critical and less compassionate. It is very important in re-building relationships to use our words for affirmation rather than criticism. Of course sometimes it is necessary to give honest feedback and guidance but it will bring less hurt and reaction if it can be done can it be done in a positive way, with care, and balanced by many affirmations. If a parent is frequently criticizing, no matter how much love they feel, it may still undermine attempts to heal a relationship. It helps to watch for children's good qualities and let them know when you see these in their behaviour. Children learn much from hearing what they do well. Not only will doing this help you to see more of the good in your child, but it will also make the child feel recognised, acknowledged and loved by you.

Watch your own interactions with your children to see just what kind of feedback you are giving them. Resistance to what you ask of a child can also be a sign to watch where we can find more positive ways to express what we want to happen in. Are you saying 'no' a lot? Are there

more negative 'don't' comments than positive 'do' comments? Perhaps 'Don't walk in the gutter!' can be 'Walk on the pavement!' 'Stop it!' can be 'Time to do this now' 'Don't hit your brother!' can be 'Be gentle with your brother'. 'Don't eat so fast!' can be 'Let's help out tummies by chewing each mouthful slowly and well'. And of course distraction with your children can help— 'look at what I found!' 'let's explore the garden' – and affirming good behaviour— 'thanks for being mummy's little helper'. 'I really appreciated your help today.'

Sometimes we need to think creatively to find alternative behaviours to unwanted ones but we all usually respond better to suggestions of what to do rather than what not to do. If you feel like there are too many 'don'ts' in your language, spend a bit of time at the beginning or end of each day thinking of the ones you use most often and try to find ways of re-phrasing them in positive ways. So 'don't climb on the chair' becomes 'you look like you have a lot of energy, I think it's time for a good run around in the garden'. Prepare a few things to bring out as 'distractions'. So 'don't touch that' can become 'I just found your old fire truck! Put that carefully back where it belongs and come and have a look' and 'Don't hit your brother' becomes 'Could you come and help me over here? Lets leave Sam to play on his own'. It is important for children to know what behaviour is and isn't allowed, but a comment suggesting what to do instead of the disapproved of behaviour is always more helpful than a frustrated 'don't! At a time when relationships are a little fraught it is useful to make the extra effort to help things flow more smoothly and positively in such ways.

When you have surrounded your child with love day after day, and changed some things in the environment, had sacred times together, hopefully the situation may have softened

enough for you to also show more genuine warmth, love and care for your child in everyday life. Use this to consolidate the healing

### *Loss and second homes*

At times of deep grief in your household, over loss, like a death, times when things can so easily fall apart, there are still positive ways you can support children. Some of these are general approaches for stressful times, like keeping good routines for mealtimes and sleep, others are more specific for times off grief and loss. (See *Grief. How can we help young children after a death.*)

In the case of an estranged or previously absent parent trying to rebuild a relationship with a child, perhaps including bringing the child into in a new home, it helps to look at all the factors which will make that second home a warm, supportive place to come to. It is important to have a cared-for, beautiful, safe space for the child to sleep in and withdraw to—preferably a place which is theirs, the same each time, but if this is not possible, at least provide a place carefully prepared afresh each time they come.

### *Change needs time, persistence and patience*

If you change some factors in the environment, deepen your understanding of the child, and mindfully care for your child with more warmth and compassion, this is often sufficient to change a relationship and behaviour. It may take time, so have patience. However if there is still serious misbehaviour going on, then you will have to look again for what might be missing—you could use the *Avoiding trouble* article as a guide to what can help.

If nothing seems to change, and you have done your best, sometimes talking it through with a good counsellor can bring new insights to the

of the relationship, and take the best of what has worked in healing the relationship into the rhythm of your life together.

They need physical and emotional warmth and predictable routine for meals and bed, which are similar to their other home if that home has good routines. They will be nurtured by healthy, home-made food, with your love and care in it, eaten at sit-down meals at a thoughtfully set table together, phones turned off or to silent. They need sacred time with you, where they are put at the centre, for a time.

Remember the healing and rebuilding of relationships is about love and care, not about affluence and the availability of money. The simplest little apartment is sufficient if it is clean and cared for and has emotional warmth in it. Of course a good warm soft duvet for the bed would not go astray. But don't fall into the trap of trying to buy children's love with bribes, and goodies, and inappropriate freedoms. They need your unconditional love and safety most of all.

relationship and situation. But sometimes, with adolescents particularly, you may also just have to wait for time to heal, knowing you have done your best, keeping a place in your heart for your child always. Love cannot be forced.

#### **A special word for fathers.**

Fathers often get the worst of separation from children in estranged marriages and divorce. But fathers are important for children, even more so after the age of seven. Conscious, caring fathers can help children to feel safe and loved when the fathers are mindful of their needs. If



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you have been separated from your children but are wanting to rebuild connections with your children, re-familiarise yourself about their age group and what your children need by reading

the *Development profile* and *Avoiding trouble* article for the appropriate age and then go for it. The children need you and their mothers need to know you are fully committed to their care.

## *Other articles of interest on the website*

*Avoiding trouble*

*Developmental Profiles* for your age child.

*Grief* How we can help children after a death

*Strategies for healthy living with children*