

# Caring & Connected Parenting

A Guide to Raising Connected Children

## 3 to 4 Years



## You as a parent



### Welcome to Caring & Connected Parenting!

*Parents who are respectful and caring while providing guidance and limits raise children who successfully manage stress, school and relationships. We tend to parent the way we were parented - unfortunate news for some of us. We may have been raised in domination type families in which fear of punishment kept us obedient or overly permissive families without structure and limits. Caring & Connected Parenting, based on the latest neuroscience research, helps you create a partnership family, one in which ALL members feel cared for, valued and respected.*

### Connecting with your child

Your child loves you and wants to be with you. At the same time, he is becoming more social. Your caring and connected way with him gives him tools to form friendships. You can help by arranging social times and by staying caring and connected.

#### Affection

Children this age need affection as much as younger children. Keep massaging and snuggling. Sit close to read and tell your child you love him.

#### Look into your child's eyes.

Go into the room where he is and say, "Look at me," before you ask him to do something.

#### Read together.

Talk about the character's feelings. Ask your child why he thinks the character feels this way.

#### Match your child.

Watch first, then approach your child with your voice and movements matching his mood: excited, calm and so on. This helps him feel understood.

#### Get on the floor and play.

Sometimes your child will reveal his fears or frustrations through play with toys. With this knowledge you can reassure him.

#### Encourage time with friends.

Help your child connect to others by finding playmates. Join library story hours, play groups, or meet other families at the park.

#### Teach first.

Don't expect to see actions you haven't taught. If you want your child to put her shoes in the closet, show her how first. Walk her through the steps until she remembers. Praise her for trying.

#### Who is your child becoming?

Who are her friends? What does she like and dislike? What are her thoughts and worries? She's not exactly like you. Explore the differences.

#### Teach problem solving.

Your child wants ice cream every night. You tell her it's expensive and not good to have too much junk food. Ask her, "How can we solve this problem?" Try her suggestions if you can.

#### The past meets the present.

We tend to parent the way we were parented. To some this is great news. To others, it means painful memories of abuse, neglect or loss affect our lives with our new families. Some of us may lose control or feel unable to connect to our children.

#### The first step.

The first step to creating a safe, healthy home for your child is to make sense of your past and see how it may be influencing your life. Depending on the intensity of your childhood experiences, you may need professional help—therapy—to make sense of things, to gain control over your actions and to heal. Get the help you need now.

If you're having difficulty parenting, or you're from a troubled background, see the **More about parenting** section on page 9.

#### Learning from you.

From the time your child is born, she is watching and learning from you. You can be the type of loving, caring parent you want your child to become one day.

#### There is no perfect parent.

Everyone makes mistakes. The goal is to raise a child who feels loved, safe and valued—a child who cares for others and for herself.

#### Fathers need to be involved.

In families in which there is a father, research shows that children do better when dad is involved. A caring father's influence may protect a child from dangers later in life, like gang violence, drug abuse and casual sex.

Children learn most when their fathers are not overly bossy or critical and let them set some direction.

Fathers who don't make an effort to connect at these early ages may find themselves drifting away from their kids over time.

#### Take time away.

Primary caregivers need breaks and time away from caring to re-energize. If you have a partner, let your partner help with childcare from the beginning. If you are not the main caregiver, show you value the difficult job your partner is doing for your child. Honor your partner's need for a break.

If you are a single parent, it will help to network with other parents and trade childcare to get time for yourself.

#### Practice calming down.

Get and give massages. Touch is calming. So is meditation.

For simple meditations, see the **More about parenting** section on page 9.

## How to connect

### Give your child a job.

He can set the table if you teach him how. He'll feel his contribution has value in your family.

*TIP: Practice following step-by-step directions by playing games like Simon Says.*

### Teach words as you go.

Teach words that fit the place—like “elephant” at the zoo. It helps him tell his story and he'll know the words as he learns to read.

### Ask about his day.

Let him draw and explain. Ask what he remembers from this day and from other days.

### Encourage self-reflection.

Ask him why... “Why do you like playing this game better than that one?” “Why do you like to have her over?”

### Repair mistakes.

If he spills milk, don't yell. Ask, “What can we do to fix this?” If you make a mistake, tell your child you were wrong. If your own emotions are getting out of control, heart racing, muscles tightening, etc., it's okay to say, “I need a few minutes and then we'll talk about this.” Be sure to talk later when you are in control.

## About feelings

### Help her identify her feelings.

It helps to be aware of body signals to understand emotions. “How does your stomach feel? What is your heart doing? A fast heart beat and tight muscles might mean you're feeling angry.”

### Respect feelings.

Don't tell her she's not angry if she is. Say, “It's okay to be mad at me. Our rule is no hitting, so take a deep breath and count to five. Now, let's think of other things we can do instead of hitting.”

### Express your feelings as well.

If you're angry, it's okay to show it, but not in a destructive way.

Nasty remarks shame your child and hurt her self-esteem. Instead, teach her how to express her anger respectfully by expressing your anger respectfully. Stick to specific comments about how her actions affect you: “I don't like pencil sharpening here. It gets on the table then I have to clean it before dinner when I have lots of other things to do. Please sharpen over the trash can.”

**A peaceful home.** If there is violence between you and your partner — battering, insults or yelling, this can seriously affect your child. Contact a local domestic violence agency or the **National Domestic Violence Hotline** at 1-800-799-7233 [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org).

### Give respect to get respect.

Listen to the tone of voice and words you use with your child. Is it respectful, the way you would talk to a friend?

No one feels good being called bad, stupid or lazy. Your child will believe these things of herself if told them over and over.

### Give time to your children.

If you're too busy to spend time with your child each day, re-evaluate your priorities or get help. Growing brains can be harmed by neglect.

### Praise his actions and efforts, not the finished product.

“Wow, you really hit that ball.” “You're working hard at that drawing.” This way, you're not judging or putting unreasonable demands on him. When he shows you his picture, ask him to tell you about the parts he likes.

### Encourage your child.

“I know you can do it! Way to go, buddy!” Fist bumps and loving pats on the back help a child want to try new things.

## What about discipline? It's good to know. . .

### Never spank, hit or shake your child.

Children at this age look older, but they still need you to keep them safe and to show them how the world works.

### Catch your child being GOOD and let her know.

“I like the way you're sharing!”

### Continue to offer choices and to distract, if necessary.

If you have an active child, let her run around for a while before you start with quiet activities.

### Help her regain self-control

with short phrases: “Use your words,” or “Stop and breathe.”

### If you say it, do it—consistently.

Only promise consequences that you can and will carry out. Keep them simple and related to the situation: “If you throw that rock, we'll leave.” Or “After you pick up your shoes, we'll do the puzzle together.” Say it calmly.

### Repeat your messages.

“You can have your snack; please hang up your jacket first.” If your child resists or whines, say it again. “It's snack time. Please hang up your jacket and then we'll eat.”

### Don't get angry—just stick to the message.

**Don't reward bad behavior.**

If your child makes loud noises whenever you speak on the phone, don't hang up saying, "I have to go; she's making lots of noise." This rewards the noise making! When she's quiet and waits or occupies herself, say "Good job, finding something to do while I called Grandma!" To be fair, make sure you aren't on the phone too much.

**More about giving choices.**

Don't say "Would you like to...?" when what you mean is "It's bath time." Follow with a choice, like "Would you like to pick your pajamas on your own or with me?"

**Plan ahead.** Your child needs to feel control over some things: her toys, your home, etc. When you visit another house, have her bring a toy to share. When guests come to your house, have her choose and put away a few toys she does not want to share—*ahead of time.*

**Use arguments to teach.**

Wait to let the children work things out for themselves. If they ask for help, guide them to a solution. Ask the children how they might settle the argument. Try an idea suggested. If it isn't working, distract them with a new activity, or separate them until they calm down. Be sure to respect both children's feelings. They learn from you.

**Give advance warning.**

"We're going to say goodbye in 10 minutes."

## About limits

**Limits are okay.**

You are the adult, you take the lead and set the limits. "Spoiled children are children looking for limits," says Dr. Brazelton, a parenting expert. No household limits means stress for you both. If your child wants to play with clay, and you have company on the way, say "No." Explain how you understand he would like to play, but you can't have the clay mess right now. Offer him another activity. Allow him to be

upset. You don't have to punish or give in—you can let him be.

**Take time to explain.**

Talk to your child about why he can't or shouldn't do something.

**Appropriate consequences.**

Find respectful ways to show your child he's gone over a limit. Have a quiet place for him to sit nearby until he calms down. Take away a privilege, such as a TV show, not a necessity, like food.

## Bumps in the road

**Sleeping**

If your child has given up naps, try "quiet time" each day. She can lie on a mat or in bed with books and quiet toys to use. Set a timer. In the morning, have books and quiet toys for her to use. Children can't read clocks. Put a small lamp on a timer and tell her when the light comes on she can get out of bed and wake you up.

**Aggression**

Ask your child for ways she might deal with wanting to break or throw things. If she can't think of anything, suggest safe tension relieving activities: drawing, running around or hitting a pillow.

If she kicks or hits you to get you to stop talking, stop what you're doing and remove her for a private talk about how to treat people with respect. Don't let disrespect go unchallenged. Calmly help her learn self-control.

**Television**

A child learns through imitation. More TV time means less time learning about her world and connecting to you. Be sure your child watches non-violent, age appropriate shows that won't cause nightmares. Commercials can also be harmful. Doctors recommend no more than one hour per day of TV for this age.

**Lying, cheating and stealing**

Children this age have great imaginations and love fantasy play. It's normal for them to try out lying. To overreact and call your child "a liar" could make the problem worse. Instead, calmly state that telling the truth is important. Then help him understand why he might have lied: was he afraid? Was he making up a story? When he begins to understand the difference between fibs and truth, ask him if he can re-tell the story using the truth in place of the non-truth. It gives him a chance to correct.

Praise him for telling the truth!

Children this young aren't experts at understanding others. Explain how the other person feels when your child cheats or steals. Explain fairness. For stealing, explain how to respect others' belongings. Help him return the object and apologize. Pay attention and be consistent to act and explain each time.

**Whining**

When your child whines say, "I can't understand whining. Speak in your usual voice." Then go about your work. Breaking the habit of whining can take time. Be patient. Praise his attempt at a usual voice when he has been whining.

### Meal times

The goal of meal times is to spend family time together (no TV). Leave power struggles out. If meals are tense, remember your own childhood to see if this may be affecting how you view the situation.

### Fussiness at meals

Shop for and make meals together. Offer samples; don't force big portions of new foods. Don't beg or bribe with dessert. Some parents offer ONE easy, healthy alternate meal, the same one each night, for example, a peanut butter and apple sandwich. You can tell your child that's "all there is" and it is her choice to eat. Be sure snacks and meals are healthy. See a doctor if you're concerned about weight.

### Siblings

Recognize your child's strengths, but don't compare her to other children or to siblings. Labeling one child "the artist," and another "the athlete" makes it so your

children won't try. Let her skills and talents unfold as she discovers who she is.

### Time-outs

Have a quiet place your child can go to when things are out of control. Play soft music or sing softly in the background. Your child needs a feeling of safety to calm down. Sit nearby. Children have short attention spans so don't expect her to stay too long. Experts say one minute per year old, but your child may not need this long.

### Toileting

Don't jump to big boy/girl pants if your child is not ready. Use training pants instead—they are easier to pull up and down. Children will start to be dry through naps and at night when they're ready. Some children may have bladders that aren't ready to hold through the night or they may be deep sleepers unable to wake themselves yet. This is normal. There's no rush.

## Painful events

### Death, divorce, moving etc.

People often think children can handle pain and bounce back, but pain can live inside the child and affect him throughout life. You can help your child make sense of painful situations and relieve some of the stress. Tell him the story of the event from his view point. Be sure to talk about his feelings, not your feelings or the feelings you think he should have. For example, "You changed schools and you had to leave your favorite swing behind. What things do you miss about that swing?" You can try making a book together. Your child can draw while you write the story out for him.



## What's next?



### After four years old. . .

The ages between birth and four are when children are at their most vulnerable. These are the years when you're developing your parenting style and when your child is learning about himself, the world and his relationships. Your caring and connected parenting can go on through all your child's ages, taking into account his mental and physical growth. No one's perfect, but parenting with love and limits will give your child a healthy start as he goes on to connect with others.



## More about parenting



### *Especially for people who had troubled childhoods*

You don't have to repeat the past. Cycles of violence continue from generation to generation until one person makes an effort to stop them. You can be that courageous person. Your children's and your grandchildren's lives can be different because of you. If you have suffered abuse, neglect or loss, you are likely to need a mental health professional to help you make sense of your life.

If you need help with your parenting right away

**1-800-4-A-CHILD**

(1-800-422-4453)

**ChildHelp: The National Child Abuse Hotline**

(Toll Free • Confidential • No Caller ID)

If there is violence between you and your partner

**1-800-799-7233**

**National Domestic Violence Hotline**

[www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

## More about parenting

### **Writing down the past**

*Looking back can help you make sense of your feelings. Answering the following questions will help you understand more about yourself. It may be hard to put words to some of the feelings you will experience, but try as best you can. Record your answers in a personal notebook. Add any thoughts you may have over time. The more you understand about yourself, the more you'll see how your past experiences may be affecting your relationship with your family now.*

1. What was it like growing up? Who was in your family?
2. How did you get along with your parents early in your childhood? How did the relationship evolve throughout your youth and up until the present time?
3. How did your relationship with your mother and father differ and how were they similar? Are there ways in which you try to be like, or try not to be like, each of your parents?
4. Did you ever feel rejected or threatened by your parents? Were there other experiences you had that felt overwhelming or traumatizing in your life, during childhood or beyond? Do any of these experiences still feel very much alive? Do they continue to influence your life?
5. How did your parents discipline you as a child? What impact did that have on your childhood, and how do you feel it affects your role as a parent now?
6. Do you recall your earliest separations from your parents? What was it like? Did you ever have prolonged separations from your parents?
7. Did anyone significant in your life die during your childhood, or later in your life? What was that like for you at the time, and how does that loss affect you now?
8. How did your parents communicate with you when you were happy and excited? Did they join with you in your enthusiasm? When you were distressed or unhappy as a child, what would happen? Did your father and mother respond differently to you during these emotional times? How?
9. Was there anyone else besides your parents in your childhood that took care of you? What was that relationship like for you? What happened to those individuals? What is it like for you when you let others take care of your child now?"

10. If you had difficult times during your childhood, were there positive relationships in or outside of your home that you could depend on during those times? How do you feel those connections benefited you then, and how might they help you now?
11. How have your childhood experiences influenced your relationships with others as an adult? Do you find yourself trying not to behave in certain ways because of what happened to you as a child? Do you have patterns of behavior that you'd like to alter but have difficulty changing?

12. What impact do you think your childhood has had on your adult life in general, including the ways in which you think of yourself and the ways you relate to your children? What would you like to change about the way you understand yourself and relate to others?

*The above Questions for Parental Self-Reflection are used with the permission of authors Daniel J. Siegel, M.D. and Mary Hartzell, M.Ed., from their book **Parenting from the Inside Out**.*

## Learning from your answers

### You can read it out loud.

After a few days, read what you have written aloud to yourself. How do your answers make you feel? How have these experiences with your parents affected how you parent or think about parenting? What do you wish your parents had done differently?

### Write what you've learned.

Write any thoughts you have learned about yourself in your notebook.

### Talk to someone you trust.

Friends or trusted clergy may help. There are many mental health professionals who have been trained

to help with experiences like yours. They can help you to heal and stop being controlled by emotions from your past.

### What can you do about it?

If some memories are hard to think about, or there are deeper issues, such as “fear of closeness, a shameful sense of being defective, or anger at your child’s helplessness,” contact a mental health professional to get the help you need to heal yourself and raise your child in a loving and connected way.

### Understanding your body.

Be aware of the signals from your body. For example, if your child spills his milk, you may feel your body starting to react—muscles tightening, heart pounding, wanting to scream. You can learn to use these as signals that it’s time to stop for the moment, calm down or leave the room. Once you are in control, guide your child calmly.

For many people, strong emotions rise and erupt quickly. For some, this can result in lashing out, swearing, yelling, or spacing out and not being present for their children.

To be a connected parent, and to discipline with respect, you need to catch yourself before you erupt. Knowing your body’s signals is an excellent way to do this.

It helps you take charge of how your emotions are expressed—and how connected you stay to your little one.

### Remember:

If you can understand why and when your strongest reactions happen, you can gradually change them.

To help with understanding, take some time after you have cooled down and repaired a connection

with your child to write about how each part of your body felt in the situation that set you off—like the spilled milk. Ask yourself why you reacted the way you did and write down whatever comes to mind.

A past of abuse, neglect or loss can mean memories stored in our minds that enter into our lives with our own children. It is very serious when you react to your child in a way that causes you to be full of rage, overly anxious, spaced-out, depressed, neglectful or unable to connect.

### Know your triggers.

What gets you going? Is it spilling things, whining, neediness, or something else? Identify your problem areas and make a list.

### Train yourself.

It’s important that you catch yourself before you become out of control. Imagine yourself in a milk-spilling (or other) situation again. Imagine your heart starting to react, your muscles tightening, etc. STOP yourself and *substitute a new response or phrase*. Repeat in your mind over and over until your new way of responding becomes your automatic response.

# 5 Steps to Self Control

- 1. Know your triggers.** Know your triggers so you can be prepared.
- 2. Listen to your body.** Do you feel your body tensing?
- 3. Stop yourself before you explode.** Say: “I choose to stay in control.”
- 4. Breathe in, breathe out, slowly.**
- 5. Take a time out yourself.** If you feel you’re losing control, tell your child “I need a few minutes” and go to a quiet room. Tense your muscles then relax them, shake your arms and legs and tell yourself: “I’m calm. He’s a child. I’m an adult. Everything is okay.” Think about why it’s difficult for you. Make a plan to respond differently.

Once you are in control...

- 1. Calmly state what you want.** “Please get the paper towels and we’ll clean this up.”
- 2. Reconnect with empathy.** Reconnect with your child when you are calm. If you’ve made a mistake and over-reacted by yelling, tell your child you’re sorry for acting that way. Think about what your child is feeling. Let him know you understand how you must have made him feel.
- 3. Self-reflect.** Ask yourself, “Why did I do that? How did my actions teach my child how to behave? Did it hurt her or set a bad example?” Review the five steps in your mind again so you can follow through on a planned reaction.

## There is no perfect parent.

We all make mistakes. Everyone gets lost at times. A caring parent keeps trying. The goal is to raise a child who feels loved, valued and safe—who cares for others as well as for herself.



## Other strategies

### Get help.

Repeated intense emotional reactions can harm your child. He can feel shame, loneliness, worthlessness, and humiliation. Get professional help to understand and gain control over your emotions.

### Observe and imitate.

In play groups, library hours, the park: watch other parents who set limits but treat their children with respect. Remember any positive relationships you’ve had in your life. What did you like about the way these people treated you? Is this something you can do for your child?

### Let go of your tough or cool image.

Growing up in an abusive home or unhealthy school situation can leave us with masks of toughness. Some of us learn it’s okay to show tough, angry feelings but not gentle, loving feelings.

It may be embarrassing to kiss our children or tell them we love them. But let down your guard, snuggle, sing and it will feel good. People are made for this kind of love.

### Use your words.

State simply what it is you want. Some parents hit to get a child’s attention. Instead, try taking a deep breath before you ask.

### Take time away.

Primary caregivers need breaks and time away from caring to re-energize. If you have a partner, let your partner help with childcare from the start. If you are not the main caregiver, show you value the difficult job your partner is doing. Honor your partner’s need for time for her/himself. If you are a single parent, exchange care with another single parent.

## Change one thought at a time

Some people have destructive thoughts that repeat in their minds and hurt them and the people around them. These thoughts may even be in the voice of a parent. If you have hurtful thoughts, like those listed below, take a moment to consider where the thoughts may be coming from. And realize that you have a right to change them! When you hear a harmful thought, *interrupt* it. Then change it—literally.

| Do you have these thoughts?          | You can change them to these.                |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| I am not worth anything.             | I am a worthwhile person.                    |
| No one could ever love me.           | I am lovable.                                |
| Nothing I do is worth anything.      | Raising a child is worthwhile.               |
| If I am myself, no one will like me. | It’s okay to be who I am.                    |
| Why bother to change things?         | Change will make me and my family healthier. |
| My child/baby did it to hurt me.     | My child is just being a child.              |
| All people are bad.                  | All people are imperfect.                    |
| Everyone is out to get me.           | There are people I can trust.                |
| Only I feel this way.                | There are professionals who understand.      |
| It’s too late to change.             | I can be a loving parent.                    |
| I’m “too damaged” to change.         | I can change, I can get help.                |

# Relaxation and meditation

## Stressed or anxious?

If you are feeling stress or anxiety, go to a quiet place, drink tea, play a musical instrument or sing, talk softly, or listen to calming music.

## Get and give massages.

Touch is calming. We all need it. Most libraries have how-to books on massage that can get you started.

## Relaxation exercises to try.

You can actually learn how to relax. These exercises can help. If you do them every day, your body will learn the cues to start relaxing. Then, even when the baby is screaming, you can call on your body to relax.

## Simple meditation.

Sit in a comfortable, upright position.

Take a slow, deep breath in. Hold for 1, 2, 3, 4, then breathe out slowly, counting 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Repeat, focusing on your breath. Keep breathing slowly in and out. Feel your belly rise with your in breath and drop with your out breath. Feel the air come into your lungs and leave your lungs. If a thought comes, notice it and let it go with your out breath. Focus on your breathing. Breathe in peace. Breathe away stress.

## Relaxation Exercise.

Sit comfortably with your back straight and hands in your lap. Breathe in slowly and deeply and release your breath slowly. Focus on your breath coming in and going out.

As you breathe, tighten the muscles in your toes, hold for a moment, and then release.

Continue the same way up your body. Slowly tighten up, hold and release your calves and thighs.

Do the same for your belly, back and chest. Now focus on your arms, shoulders and neck. Now do your ears, lips, cheeks and forehead.

Keep breathing slowly. Let worries fly away with your breath as you release it. Try it with eyes open or closed.

## Guided Visualization.

Think of a quiet place you like such as a park, seashore, or woods. Linger there in your mind. Breathe in the air, imagining its scent as you breathe. Let the faint sounds wash over you and tell you that you are in a safe place. Feel the ground, water, or sand in your hands. Feel the texture as it runs through your fingers and falls back to the ground. This is your special place, a safe place, where you can be strong and whole. Relax with your sounds and smells, breathing slowly in and out.

Feel your belly rise and fall as your breath moves in and out. When you are ready, take another deep breath, exhale and come back to the room. You are back in your body, feeling peaceful and knowing you are safe and whole.

If you practice this daily, you will be able to call your special place to mind to calm yourself as needed.



## Loving-kindness meditation

Sitting comfortably, breathe in and out slowly as before.

While paying attention to your breath moving slowly in and out, call to mind someone who loves you or loved you just the way you are.

Picture yourself with this person and let yourself feel the feelings you have with her/him. Let these kind and loving feelings wash over you.

Be aware that you are loved for who you are, without having to be someone else.

Let yourself feel her/his arms around you. Feel yourself rocking as your breath moves in and out. Feel your heart beating. Feel the warmth of her/his love washing over all of you.

Stay with the slow breathing and the feeling of your heart beating and imagine that the arms have become your arms and you are rocking yourself.

Feel your own love and acceptance of yourself.

Think or whisper to yourself: "I am safe. I am happy. I am lovable."

When you are comfortable with this meditation, let thoughts of your child, your partner and others into your arms and imagine them bathing in the love that flows from your heart.

Wish for them, "May you be safe. May you be happy. May you feel loved."

*Adapted from Jon Kabat-Zinn's book **Coming to Our Senses**.*

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