



## Building a strong, supportive relationship with your child

Relationships play a vital role in a child's social and emotional development. Parents and caregivers are a child's first teacher and model the relationships they will form throughout their lives. Strong parent/caregiver and child relationships support positive mental health and well-being and help your child cope with challenges and recover from setbacks.

This resource was developed to assist parents/caregivers in continuing to strengthen their connection with their child.

**Note:** While we use the term "child" throughout, we recognize that the child in your care may be a teenager or young adult, and that you may be caring for more than one child.

### What is relationship building?

The foundation of relationship building is connection. Healthy connections form between parents/caregivers and children through positive interactions. This looks different for children at various stages. Responding to an infant's cry, playing a game with a young child and making time for conversation with a teen are all examples of positive interactions.

Positive parent/caregiver and child relationships provide trust and safety, and an opportunity to learn relationship, problem-solving, self-advocacy and self-regulation skills.

### Why is it so important to build a healthy relationship with my child?

When a parent/caregiver notices a child's needs and responds positively, a child grows up feeling safe and better prepared for life's challenges. Strong relationships between parent/caregivers and children lead to overall improved well-being for both. Research shows that a positive and connected adult support person is a predictor of childhood resilience in the face of mental health challenges.

### What strategies will help me build a healthy relationship with my child?

Just as no two families are the same, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to relationship building. Different strategies work in different families, with different children, and at different stages of development; however, the main goal is to help everyone feel more connected.



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Try these relationship-building ideas with your family. Don't worry if they feel unfamiliar or challenging at first.

### Find time to be present

Family life is busy. Carving out one-on-one time with your child can be a challenge, but a little goes a long way. Try setting a goal of at least 20 minutes of distraction-free time with your child daily. If that's unrealistic, find an amount that works for your family. Set aside technology to:

- read together or play a game,
- make art or take a walk,
- engage in cultural practices or traditions,
- for older teens, try a focused conversation while driving or riding transit.

Or try any other activity that resonates for your family. If your child asks to spend time with you but you're occupied, set a time to engage with them later. This tells them that although you're busy, together time is important to you.

### Look for opportunities for connection in your daily routine

Complete daily tasks together, prepare or eat meals as a family, and create end-of-day rituals like chats, or bedtime stories. Try one new practice daily and add more as you go.

### Practice positive communication

Talking to your child is important for relationship building. Here are some tips to encourage healthy conversations:

- Prioritize listening. Give your child your full attention when they speak. Take time to hear what they have to say before responding with patience and warmth.
- Offer words of encouragement; children thrive on positive attention. Use feedback: "I like the way you \_\_\_\_" or "I'm proud of you for \_\_\_\_".

At times you'll want to communicate with your child, but the timing isn't right for them. Tell them you look forward to listening when they are ready.

When they share a concern or feeling, rather than jumping in with problem-solving, use validation, for example: "It makes sense that you're sad, can you tell me more about it?". This tells your child that you recognize and respect their emotions, that emotions are OK, and it encourages them to continue expressing how they feel.

## What if I have a conflict with my child?

No relationship is entirely conflict-free. Learning how to resolve conflicts with a focus on relationship repair is vital to creating a trusting and confident relationship with your child. It teaches problem-solving skills and shows them how to make repairs in relationships with others. Here are some ideas for repairing connection after a conflict:

- Start with a self-check-in. How are you feeling? Are you calm and ready to talk? If necessary, practice self-care before starting a conversation with your child.
- Invite your child to share their feelings and concerns first before sharing yours. This puts you in the position of the listener and suggests you are willing to listen to, and understand, their perspective before sharing your own concerns or jumping to conclusions.
- Express care and genuine intent to repair the relationship.
- Brainstorm possible solutions together, including potential consequences and what can be done differently next time.

Building and keeping close and connected relationships with your child can be challenging, but the reward is worth it!



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## Helpful Resources

- [Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers](#), 2005 by Gordon Neufeld, Gabor Mate M.D.
- [What to Say to Kids When Nothing Seems to Work: A Practical Guide for Parents and Caregivers](#), 2020 by Adele Lafrance, Ashley P. Miller

Reach out to your local Public Health Department or EarlyON Child and Family Centre to find out about Parenting Programs that might be running in your area:

- <https://www.ontario.ca/page/public-health-unit-locations>
- <https://www.ontario.ca/page/find-earlyon-child-and-family-centre>
- For adoptive parents: <https://adoption.on.ca/ci/galaxy-of-adoption/growing-into-your-role-as-a-parent/>

## References

Hazel NA, Oppenheimer CW, Technow JR, Young JF, Hankin BL. Parent relationship quality buffers against the effect of peer stressors on depressive symptoms from middle childhood to adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*. 50(8):2115-23.

