



Session 2

Making a heart connection with your child

Our God loves relationship. He created us to have relationship with Him and with each other. Jesus highlighted the importance of relationship when He was asked what the greatest commandments were: loving God and loving each other. It pleases Him when we seek Him, talk to Him, wait on Him and receive from Him. He wants to connect with our children's hearts too and as parents, we have an important role to play in helping our children connect with God. The way that we relate to them can help them grow into faith-filled children who love and connect with their heavenly Father.

When we try to relate to our children as God relates to us, we can start to show something of God's heart to our children. To do this we need to ask God to show us how He sees our children. When one of my sons was a toddler, I was really struggling to parent him and felt completely inadequate. In my desperation I turned to God and He showed me the amazing heart He had put in my son and the character He was building. This completely changed my position in how I responded to my son. I realised I needed to guide him and provide solid boundaries rather than trying to change him. In this way, God empowered me to help direct my son instead of trying to squash him and his behaviours.

Freedom is critical to relationship. We were created with free will so that we can choose to enter into a relationship with God. God will love us and guide us as we follow Him, but He doesn't force us to go His way. Instead He gives us choices – we can choose to follow Him or not. It is important to ask ourselves whether this freedom is reflected in our parenting. How do we relate to our children? Does it mirror how God relates to us? Do we look to control from the outside or build relationship with and guide our children through allowing them choices? Parenting should not primarily be about enforcing rules, our role is to equip our children to make the right choices for themselves. We do this by connecting with our children, showing them God's heart for them and guiding them in love.

So how do we do that?

Connecting. There are many different ways we can connect with our children and it may look quite different for different children. This is where it is important to know each of your children and how they best relate. You can find some helpful tools to help facilitate connecting in Rachel Turner's book, 'Parenting Children for a Life of Confidence'.

Giving children freedom to choose. As parents we want what is best for our children and sometimes it feels like the easiest way to achieve this is to make choices for them. Obviously, when our children are very young we do need to make a lot of choices for them. However, as they grow and as their understanding of the world develops we can increase the choices they have. By giving our children choices we show them that they are powerful beings in control of their behaviour – they may not be able to control other people or situations but they can control how they respond. This will help them to take responsibility for themselves and realise they have choices in how they respond. Giving young children small choices can make them feel empowered, for example, letting them choose what clothes they would like to wear or giving them a choice of breakfast cereals.

Modelling free choice. As parents we can show our children how we are free to choose what we do, too. When my sons choose to talk to me in a disrespectful or whiny way I will say to them, “I don’t like the way you are talking to me at the moment, I am going to go into the other room and when you are ready to talk to me respectfully you can come to me.” This shows them that I am not controlled by their behaviour. Rather than get frustrated by their actions, I am making a choice to remove myself from the situation. From this they can see that they don’t have to be controlled by situations they find themselves in – they always have a choice in how they respond. For younger children you might make this simpler by saying, “It’s not fun being with you when you behave like this. You can either go in the other room and continue doing X, or you can stop doing X and stay in here with me and have some fun!”

Dealing with wrong choices. So what if our children make the wrong choices? There are endless examples of God’s people making wrong choices. Failures and mistakes that our children make are not disasters; they help our children to learn how to manage and control themselves. If they know their parents will always save them and clear up their mess, it won’t help them to avoid making the same mistake again. As parents we need to avoid being scared of mistakes, instead we need to look to God for the plan moving forward and help them through the mistake. God always has a plan and a way when we mess up.

We can help our children to navigate the choices they come across in life by making sure that our hearts remain connected to theirs. When your child fails and makes poor choices, their relationships are what will draw them to you and to God. When we mess up God shows us love, acceptance, grace and mercy. Ask God to help you demonstrate this kind of love to your child when they mess up; it’s pretty much impossible to do without His help!

Obedience. Although we want to give our children freedom, this doesn’t mean that we don’t expect them to listen to us and do as we ask. Expecting our children to listen to us and providing consequences when they don’t is also an important part of guiding and helping our children to grow. We should teach our children to be obedient as part of our love for and connection with them.

Here are some tips from Rachel Turner's book 'Parenting Children for a Life of Confidence', on how to connect with your child:

- Understand them through curiosity. Ask your child lots of questions. Not just when issues arise - try to find out what situations are like through their eyes. The more you chat with your child in the everyday, the easier they will find it to chat with you when something serious happens.
- Respond with empathy and bring truth. Don't 'react' emotively to problems and mistakes – your emotion will be a distraction. Instead, try to step back and respond. Be empathetic in your response but not emotional - this is their problem, not yours. Your role is to steward them through and provide guidance and support.
- Connect your children to yourself and God. Show love and support to your child, give them advice and help them to recognise their options. Ultimately, it is God who has the answer so point your child to God, pray with them and encourage them to connect with Him.
- Help children to be powerful for the next time. Through each situation we want to help our children remember the truth they have learned so that if a similar situation arises they will know the truth that will help them navigate it.

Ultimately, we need to take our lead from God and how He loves and parents us. Take some time to reflect on how God shows His love to us, how He connects with us and how He responds when we make the wrong choices. As we connect to God and draw closer to Him, He will show us how to parent His way. And as we reflect His heart towards our children, they will see something more of their heavenly Father and this will draw them to Him too.

Here are some questions it might be useful to consider when thinking about how you parent.

- What is it that motivates me in my parenting? What am I looking to achieve? Is it about making my children look good? Living my dreams through them? Avoiding embarrassment?

- Do I have the same motivation in my interactions with my children as God has for me?
- Am I looking at the outside/presented behaviours of my children or am I seeking to look inside at their hearts?
- Do I look to simply punish and remove bad behaviours or do I look to connect with my children and help them to become the people that God has designed them to be?

Principles:

1) Relationship and heart-connection should be what motivates us as parents.

1 John 4: 19 “We love because He first loved us.” (NIV)

2) We should seek to relate to our children as God relates to us; through love and freedom not fear and control.

Galatians 5:13: “For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don’t use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love.”

(New Living Translation)

3) When we relate to our children as God relates to us they will experience something of God’s love for them.

Ephesians 3:18: “...may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.”

(NIV)

Questions:

- How would you describe God's parenting style compared to yours?
- How can you help to strengthen your heart-connection with God?
- How can you help to strengthen your heart-connection with your child this week?
- How can you help your child to live in greater freedom?

Practicals:

- Spend some time chatting with God about each of your children. Tell Him what you love about your child and the struggles you are having and then seek Him on how to reflect His heart for your child. Write down anything you get from God.
- Put aside time to connect with your child. Find a fun activity to do together.
- Think about what choices you would like to give your child this week and how you can help guide them if they make a wrong choice.