

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



Attention is the currency of relationships

Being in the moment when parents are with their children boosts their confidence and resilience

Article contributed by Justin Coulson

There is one thing that shows our children we love them more than anything else in the world. It is taking the time to be emotionally available for them. In my book I refer to it as 'being where your feet are'.

This idea seems so simple that it might be easy to nod your head in agreement, shrug your shoulders, and move on. But to do so may mean you miss the valuable insight that practicing emotional availability provides for your family. Parents who are emotionally available will find that their children are among those most likely to grow up secure, confident and resilient.

Being emotionally available requires us to pay attention – close attention – to the emotional world of our children, and to respond compassionately. In fact,

Just as dollars are the currency of our economy, attention is the currency of our relationships.

Being emotionally available

My eight year old daughter drove this point home to my wife and I during a recent conversation. We were conducting a parenting performance appraisal (which you can read more about on my blog). My wife asked Ella,

"Do Mummy and Daddy make you feel important?"

Her response:

"When you are busy you don't listen to me properly. Like when Dad's on the computer or you [Mum] are doing craft you're not available to me. It feels like those things are more important than me."

Ouch. Those were her words, not mine. Our kids notice when we are not available.

A father told me he was having daily battles with his teenage daughter. I suggested he go for regular walks with her each morning or evening and be emotionally available. The first few walks were awkward. She felt like he had an agenda, and she refused to talk. But within a week they were looking forward to their time together and talking more freely and pleasantly than they had for months. He complained to me (in jest) that he was thinking of making the walks less regular just so she would stop chewing his ear off!

Invite Your Children Into Your Space

Whether your child is two or twenty two, being emotionally available will improve your relationships with your children. Here's how to do it:



Go out, turn off your phone, and simply be together – and listen.

It may be in a park, at the beach or on a mountain trail. It might simply be wandering around your neighbourhood. Just make sure there are no distractions (so that means no movies – you can't talk). Then ask questions, listen carefully and suspend judgement.

Your children will love being in your space and will feel special. Invite them to allow you into their space. It may take more than one date. But if you put your attention into your relationships, they'll become enriching sources of happiness and meaning for you.

Mums and dads who make themselves available for their children have happier families and better functioning children. Kids do best with both parents being there emotionally, regardless of your family structure. Having happy kids and strong family relationships ... it's about time.

Hints for being emotionally available to your children:

- ▶ Minimise distractions by turning off TV, radio, the internet and iPods.
- ▶ Ensure every child gets some one-on-one time with just you.
- ▶ Ask questions, listen, suspend judgement.
- ▶ When one of your children says something to you, stop what you're doing and really take in their words.
- ▶ Try to look past the things they say to see their heart and the intent behind their words.
- ▶ Recognise that challenging behaviour may be your child using her limited communication skills to send a signal that she needs you.

Dr Justin Coulson is a parenting expert and the author of *What Your Child Needs From You: Creating a Connected Family*. He blogs at happyfamilies.com.au and offers parenting coaching and workshops.