

## CONNECTION BEFORE CORRECTION

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When I first started teaching, almost 20 years ago, one of the “pearls of wisdom” that many new teachers heard was to never let the children see you smile before the holiday break. The intent, I'm sure, was to convey the importance of setting consistent and predictable limits with children, and establishing your roles as the adult in the classroom. This makes sense, as many new young teachers attempt to win children over by being their friend rather than their teacher. However, both approaches are incomplete. One lacks warmth and the other lacks firmness.

Decades of research in teaching and parenting styles have revealed that children thrive when the adults in their lives are both warm and firm at the same time. As a matter of fact, in direct contradiction to the advice I was given as a new teacher, children need a sense of connection with the adults in their lives before correction can be truly effective, long-term.

Recently, I asked my oldest son to get his younger brothers and sisters for dinner. I had just finished making some macaroni and cheese, and had it ready for the children at the kitchen counter/bar. In a few minutes, my son was back downstairs and engaged in something other than eating the macaroni and cheese; and his brothers and sister were still upstairs. My instinct was to reprimand him, or guilt him into getting his siblings so they could eat and appreciate all my hard work. However, what I did was to approach him and give him a big hug, tell him how much I loved him, and then asked kindly, with a smile, where his siblings were. His response was, “Oh, they didn't come down, let me go get them.” And he did.

Why does this work? In simple terms, children (and adults) do better when they feel better. They do worse when they feel worse, or are under stress. One school of thought tells us that people will be motivated to do better when they experience the consequences for their actions (meaning negative consequences). However, what we have learned from recent brain research is something very different. When people are under stress (angry, afraid, upset, frustrated, etc.), they are functioning from the right brain and limbic system. The limbic system is responsible for regulating memory and emotion. However, reasoning, using logic, or learning a life lesson happens on the other side of the brain, and the use of the per-frontal cortex is needed for such activity. So, in order for children to learn from their mistakes, they need to be using the left side of their brain. Here's the rub: the left side of the brain doesn't work well until the right side is calmed down. And, one of the primary ways for the right brain to calm down is through a sense of connection, especially if the connection is non-verbal (the left side of the brain is responsible for verbal processing). The non-verbal connection can come from a knowing and loving smile, a hug, or warm eye contact. After the connection, the left brain and pre-frontal cortex begin firing on all cylinders and children can then process what your guidance and correction.

When I gave my son a hug, it helped both him and me. I was reminded, too, of how much I loved him and how important he is to me. He was able to feel a sense of connection, and his left brain was able to process my message to him. In this instance, I was able to simply give him a gentle reminder through a question, and he was able to absorb the subtle cue, and make his own decision, keeping his dignity in-tact. Now, I will freely admit, that in the moment, not all of this information was running through my mind. I simply used a tool or principle that I knew to be effective for my son and for me, and I employed it in order to get the kids to the table and to maintain peace in my relationship with my son.

This principle of connecting before correcting can be used in many ways. With older children, it may take the form of a conversation where a parent sits down with their child and asks them questions to truly understand where their child or adolescent is really coming from, truly seeking to understand their point of view. Of course, this means starting by putting aside the adults agenda, so it is critical that the adult is calm and open,

themselves, before engaging in this conversation. Many adults find that after such a conversation, both the adult and the child have a deeper sense of connection with one another. The adult has a better understanding of the child's perspective (even if that perspective is not completely accurate, as may be the case with teens), and the child feels understood – and isn't that what most older children and teens really want! When this has occurred, real problem solving can take place.

With younger children, a key element to developing connection is the adults physical approach to the child. Adults are sometimes 4 to 5 times the size of a young child. That size difference can be intimidating, especially if the adult has an angry or frustrated expression. Intimidation might get short term results, but long-term this only invites rebellion or submission. So, crouching down, giving a hug, and letting a young child know how much you love them before you correct them is key to being effective long-term, and will help them learn the important life-lessons which parents have the wisdom teach.