



what matters most

by Colleen Drobot

Lately I have been thinking about how vital it is that I communicate to my children that they are very important to me. In our busy lives simple acts of showing our children they matter to us can get lost in the shuffle. We know we love our children, however, sometimes we may forget to express how much they matter to us.

When I think back to my childhood, I know I was special to my father when he would tweak my toes as we watched “The Carol Burnett Show” sharing a little plate of pickles, tomatoes and garlic sausage only he and I enjoyed. Or unexpectedly, he’d tickle me and tell me he was going to put salt and pepper on me and eat me all up! I’d giggle and feel very special. Out of the blue, my mother used to come up and hug me and say, “I haven’t seen you all day!” even though I had been right under her feet as she did the housework. These moments made me feel very loved and significant to them. They felt like free gifts—I didn’t need to achieve anything or work for their love; they showed their affection simply because of *who I was*, not for *what I did*.

Research tells us the best way to deepen attachment with our children is to convey to them *warmth, enjoyment, and delight to be in their presence*. As Vancouver based developmental psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld points out, around four years old, children begin to realize Mommy and Daddy hold close what they hold dear. Therefore, feeling significant, mattering, being valued in the family by those they are attached to becomes of the utmost importance to children.

When I was young, there were also painful moments in my family when I didn’t feel very significant. Being the baby of three children, I sometimes felt my opinion wasn’t important, that I couldn’t keep up physically or cognitively, that my voice wasn’t heard. The times the whole family was together were some of the most difficult for me. When I reflect on what made me feel special and significant, it was the little moments that one of my parents and I shared together.

Spending one-on-one time with each child is very important for deepening attachment. Often we tend to have a fantasy that the

whole family shares activities together. Although this can be very nourishing to its members, my clients often report the family dynamics can cause more division than attachment. I encourage them to find special activities or one-on-one time that one parent and the child share. This is especially important when a parent is trying to restore a relationship that has been strained or when challenging behaviour is an issue.

When I ask my clients who it was that made them feel special and important in their childhood, it may not have been a parent, but a teacher, a grandparent, a community mentor or coach. Those moments when they felt valued have impacted them deeply to this day; they recount feelings of ease or being at rest in the adult’s presence, not having to do anything, and feeling accepted for who they were. Carl Roger’s calls this *unconditional positive regard*. It is critical for healthy development of a child.

As parents we will never create the perfect family. But rather our goal can be to become more conscious of our interactions with our children. That twinkle in our eye, our face lighting up when our child walks in the room, the warmth in our tone as we greet them, enjoy-

ing a moment or sharing a joke together...these gestures tell them they are invited to exist in our presence, that they are important and matter to us. Our kids need to know that we are the luckiest parents in the world to have been blessed with the very child we always wanted.

It brings to mind a quote I love by developmental psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner: “... *in order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. Somebody’s got to be crazy about that kid. That’s number one. First, last and always.*” ★

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