DAY
9

Understand

Science tells us that we are not very good at understanding our children. We say things like, "Do you think the world revolves around you?" – when clearly we are suggesting that it revolves around us!

Understanding our children means we comprehend and perceive:

- *Their development*
- *Their needs*
- *Their unique attributes and ways of being in the world and the family.*

Once we have them, we quickly recognise that each child is different. They have unique characteristics and abilities, unique strengths, and unique way of seeing the world.

When we understand our children we experience less conflict in relationships with them, and we make them feel valued and worthy, which builds their resilience. Research indicates that children will be far more likely to become caring, loving people when their experience of us as parents is that we are caring, loving, and understanding.

Here are your activities to build understanding over the next few days (and the rest of your life!).

Away, against or toward?

Dr John Gottman suggests that we turn towards our children and their emotions rather than turning away from them or turning against them.

When we turn against, we disapprove. We get mad. We become frustrated. We blame our children.

When we turn away, we dismiss. We ignore. We tell them not to worry because it's not a big deal.

When we turn towards, we see their emotion and behaviour as a chance to connect, to be together, to teach, and to build them — and the relationship.

Consider (or if you can, discuss, together with your spouse or partner) one example of each of these alternatives that you have personally experienced with your children in the past week. Each of you make some notes about your observations in the space provided below.

TURNING AWAY

This week I turned away from _____

How did my child feel? _____

_____

How did I feel? _____

_____

_____

What was the outcome? _____

_____

What would it have looked like if I'd turned towards, rather than away? What would I have done? What would I have said?

_____

_____

TURNING AGAINST

This week I turned against _____

How did my child feel? _____

_____

_____

How did I feel? _____

_____

What was the outcome? _____

_____

What would it have looked like if I'd turned towards, rather than against? What would I have done? What would I have said?

_____

_____

This week I turned towards _____

How did my child feel? _____

_____

_____

How did I feel? _____

_____

What was the outcome? _____

_____

_____

_____

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_____

ACTIVITY #2

Skill development

If you have a soccer ball, a hackysack, or another kind of small ball that you can kick, take your children outside and try to "juggle" the ball on your feet. That is, kick the ball repeatedly without it hitting the ground. See if you can kick the ball ten times without it touching the ground. Now work as a couple, or as a family, and see if you can get ten consecutive kicks (or juggles) using only your feet without the ball hitting the ground.

If you fail (and the idea of this exercise is that you will fail), get everyone in trouble — but don't be too mean about it. Tell everyone that they have to try harder! If they still can't do it, offer them bribes. If they still fail (which they should, unless you're a soccer family), have a discussion about things:

- *Did getting everyone in trouble help?*
- *What about offering bribes?*
- *Why not?*

The answer is that when we get people in trouble, or offer bribes, we fail to understand the deeper reasons for the challenges. The real reason no one could juggle the ball ten times (or twenty times) without it touching the ground was because you haven't developed the skill to do it. It takes time and practice to be able to do some things. And that means teaching, and patience.

ACTIVITY #3
Development quiz

HOW OLD IS THE AVERAGE CHILD BEFORE S/HE CAN DO THE FOLLOWING?

Tries to write name _____

Lifts head and chest when lying on stomach _____

Put on shoes (not tie laces) _____

Pedal a tricycle _____

Regulate/ Have control over emotions _____

Open doors, drawers and everything else _____

Can follow multiple commands _____
(Get changed, wash hands, come and eat dinner)

Smiles when smiled at _____

Can brush teeth competently _____

Understands how other people are feeling _____

Knows if he/ she is a boy or girl _____

Can use the toilet competently _____

Identify several body parts _____

Walk with one hand held _____

We need to understand what our children are developmentally capable of before we start telling them off for not measuring up!

Answers: 4, 3 months, 3, 3, 8, 2, 6, 4 weeks, 5, 5, 3, 3.5, 2, 12 months

The Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence suggests that using the RULER acronym we can better understand and work with our children's emotions. Dr John Gottman has a similar 5-step process for understanding our children's emotional world and working with them through their emotions AND setting limits.

R Recognise
   Become aware of the child's emotion

U Understand
   Recognise the emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching

L Label
   Listen empathically, validating the child's feelings

E Experience
   Help the child find words to label the emotion s/he is feeling

R Regulate
   Set limits while exploring strategies to solve the problem

Take time this week to practice implementing these ideas. At their simplest, recognise your child's emotion and give it a name. This will help him/her calm down. Patiently soothe him/her as things cool down - remaining calm yourself. Then, once things are calm, ask "What is the best thing to do now?" Encourage them to make their own decisions, and guide them as needed.

Take home message

The take-home message? Our children don't need us to get mad at them. They don't need us to fix everything. They need us to understand. The steps are simple. First, see their challenging behaviour as a chance to connect. Second, understand the need that's driving the behaviour. Third, name their emotions. If you can name it you can tame it. Fourth, have it in your heart that you want to help. Fifth, problem solve together once they're calm.