

Session 7 – Skill Building: Connect Then Redirect Part 1

Welcome back!

How did you spend last week Thursday morning since Selah was cancelled?

Joy memory from Christmas

Re-read Theme Verse: **Heb 12:1**

Listen to the theme song. Let your heart quiet. Let Jesus speak to you about how He sees your life race. Where does He see you excelling and doing well? Where does He want to give you a pep talk so you keep going or start moving again? Ask Him for a renewed love for your kids, spouse and family.

PRAYER – for us to feel a sense of community here among moms, to be encouraged by each others' stories and to learn tools for how to effectively disciple our kids

I am super excited for our sessions from now until May! Fall was like the warm-up and now we're going to start sweating a bit. We have just 8 Learn-it weeks until the end of the year but each one is going to help you grow skills and capacity for your motherhood race. Our focus will be on **2 keys of parenting:**

1. Working on ourselves so that we grow our capacity and inner strength. [When we are in overwhelm we can't parent the way we should. Personally I find that when I'm in overwhelm I can't STOP and take the breather I need to in order to parent lovingly. Instead I become reactive and angry in my responses. When we take the time to identify our triggers, find healing and learning new pathways of behavior for ourselves we can become better parents.]

2. Working on our parenting skills. [It takes skill to parent and every skill takes practice to be done well. Just because you read a book doesn't mean you'll be a good parent. You actually have to work at it. And if parenting is our most important job then we need to take the necessary time and energy to learn to do our job well.]

These 2 keys are going to be our focus for the remainder of the year, in an every other session pattern. Today will be a practical skills focus, building off the brain session I did in November.

REVIEW: Left-brain vs right brain and upstairs brain vs downstairs brain.

- Remember that the brain has 4 basic parts (L-R-U-D). Each area has a specialized function and they need to be anatomically separate in order to carry out these functions. But on their own each area is weak, even problematic when they try to be in charge.
- The goal is to get all the areas working together harmoniously, to be integrated. This goes for us personally and when we are discipling our kids.
- Hopefully you've had a chance to start recognizing the various functions of the brain in your own life, including your response tendencies.
- **The left side** is logical, literal, linguistic (likes words) and linear (wants to put things in order). It helps give order and structure to our lives.
- **The right side** is basically non-verbal. It's relational (which is the area that helps us connect to others), and experiential (meaning it focuses on how an event personally felt not necessarily on the facts).
- Left side is all about the letter of the law: "I didn't eat the candy. I licked the candy."

- Right side is all about the spirit of the law: “I’ll die if I don’t get that candy!”
- If you are dealing with someone who is stuck in LB it will be very hard to help them think outside the box and see things from another point of view.
- If you are dealing with someone who is stuck in RB it will be extremely frustrating to try to get them to see logic.
- **The downstairs brain** is responsible for our basic reactions (like breathing and blinking – things you don’t think about but do automatically), our reactive responses: fight, flight, freeze, faint (like pulling our hand away from a hot element), and our strong emotions (rage, sadness, disgust, fear, etc).
- **The upstairs brain** is where higher level thinking takes place: imaging, planning, analyzing and making good decisions. It’s also where empathy for others is found.
- If our downstairs brain senses danger, it can hijack the brain and not allow for the upstairs brain to be accessed. This is when we, or our kids, get stuck and can’t get out of a negative emotion. Or when we feel fine and then a trigger causes us to flip our lid and not calm easily.
- I also talked about how very young children are right-brain dominant and the staircase from their downstairs brain to their upstairs brain is very underdeveloped. So they tend to be very emotional and reactive. In other words, it’s normal for kids to overreact, flip out or go ballistic. When this happens their brain is in a **dis-integrated state**.
- One of our key jobs as parents is to help our kids learn how to quiet their strong emotions, re-integrate their brains and then practice good choices to build better pathways.
- In order to do this, we have to start with **CONNECTION**. This means coming to a place where we understand what our child is feeling and being able to showing them that we understand their internal world. When they feel felt by us, their brains can calm, allowing them to access their upstairs brain.

WHY CONNECT?

I want to pause here for a bit before we get into the practical. I feel like I need to give a warning for those of you who are learning this for the first time and a re-encouragement for those of you who have heard this all before. We’ve talked about the importance of attuning, connecting, to our kids and others over the past 2 years (actually even as far back as the Shepherding a Child’s Heart course that Bonnie taught 3 years ago). Many of you have made and are making changes to how you parent which is so fantastic.

Here’s the caution though, coming from my own personal experience. Whenever you learn something new it’s always very exciting at first. You can see the why and you want to put it into practice. When you do it right you can see changes and it feels good. But anything worthwhile takes energy and time and we all get tired. At some point you’re going to feel like this connecting thing is too much work and that it’s easier and faster to lay down the law with a stern mommy voice in order to get immediate behavior change. [I remember telling Kris one day that all this stuff is great, but sometimes the kids need to know that I mean business.]

There might be other thoughts in your mind, like that this feels too permissive. That letting kids express emotions and then empathizing with these emotions will make them feel like they are in charge and it’s OK to misbehave. I’ve heard moms say that they felt like others were looking down on them for not being more in control of their kids when they don’t immediately shut down their behavior. You may also notice that when you start to let you kids feel their emotions, rather than shutting them down, that their emotional floodgates burst open even

further and your kids seem out of control. All these things may cause you to feel like what we're teaching you is not working and that this isn't such a great strategy after all. You'll want to bottle everything back up and re-inforce military law in your home.

Then there's the devil. He hates this stuff. Loving kids? Helping them become good people and make good choices? Forget it. He's going to do everything He can to make you doubt this way of parenting and give up, including lies like you're a bad mom; you can't do this stuff; you always mess up. The truth is we will all make mistakes, many mistakes, and it's going to take time and practice to do this well. And just when you think you're getting the hang of it, your kids will do something new and you'll have to go back to the drawing board.

If it's so hard, why bother doing it?

1. Science shows that kids are programmed to need their primary attachments to come from us their parents. If they don't feel connected to us in their pain, they will look for other ways to soothe their hurt, which will only cause them more pain because those things won't satisfy them. It's super important that we learn to connect with them now when they are little – even though their issues and struggles seem so petty and frustrating – so that we build their trust and feelings of security with us. God's given us this time now to practice and learn how to reach their hearts before their problems get big and real and they've stopped trusting us.
2. Science also shows, over decades of research, that when kids feel loved by their parents (or primary care givers) their brains can then develop skills that help them regulate their emotions, have empathy, learn self-control, greater success in school and have better relationships. This should be huge incentive for us to want to parent this way!
3. And we should also be motivated to train our children in this way because it's how God fathers us! He is gentle, understanding and always ready to listen even though we know He also expects obedience.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 1 Cor 13:1-7 (NIV)

We need to walk forward with courage and believe that this is the right way to parent and that we will reap good fruit in time. In my own life, I've seen a child with severe anxiety and shame learn tools for how to deal with his emotions in positive ways. I'm watching my closed off daughter become better and better at sharing emotions and feelings. And I'm seeing my kids using constructive ways to solve their conflicts rather than fighting. The fruit isn't always immediate but it's so worth it. One of the biggest ways to stay motivated and thwart off the devil is to keep meeting together as moms. When we share our stories and hear others' stories we learn and gain courage. So let me start today with a story from a Selah mom...

STORY – Candace Wiebe and her 2 year old daughter Ellamae

Ellamae gets really excited every night when I tell her it's bath time. But for the past 6 months or so she has played and laughed and splashed happily for the first ten minutes, then when she sees me take out the soap and shampoo she completely flips out, refuses to sit on her bum, cries and clings onto the edge of the tub for dear life. I don't know of any bad experience she has had that would cause her to react this way, and it has been SO frustrating and annoying. I get overwhelmed because I can't seem to say or do anything to make the crying stop. Many times there has been this little urge inside me that wants to yell "JUST STOP CRYING!!" because I don't see anything that should be making her react this way.

I've been learning though that she is FEELING something inside that makes her scared or worried, and crying and clinging to the edge of the tub is how she reacts to the feelings she has. I was inspired by Nicole's testimony several weeks ago when she shared about her daughter having those "freak out" moments before going to church, and how she took a minute to pray with her and everything changed. I came to realize that this bath time issue was completely in God's hands. I didn't have the eyes to see the problem, and God was making me depend on HIM instead of myself. I decided to give prayer and God a chance! (and I really hate admitting that it took me so many months before turning to Him.) So in the last couple weeks when she began to whimper and hold on tight to the edge of the tub, and cry, I decided to pray. So I would ask her, "Should we pray?" And she would immediately relax, let go of the edge of tub and reach out for my hands. We would hold hands and I would say a short prayer for God to bring her peace and release any fear or anxiety in her, that she wouldn't be afraid of taking a bath. She immediately would become more calm and I could see she felt more peace as her body relaxed, her breathing slowed down, and she loosened her grip on the edge of the tub. We would count from 1 to 10 as I poured 10 little cups of water over her hair and body to wash off the shampoo and soap.

On Friday night the idea came to mind to pray BEFORE the bath instead of once the crying started. I was amazed at my daughter's behavior. She was a different kid! No crying, no clinging to the tub. She was so relaxed and at ease. We counted together as I poured the cups of water over her again, and she was really having a good time! She was even giggling, saying the water tickled as I poured it over her skin! I could hardly believe what I was experiencing! This was a miracle!

That same evening, I got out the eczema lotion for her, as we do after every bath, and usually she gets very anxious and has another freak out moment, similar to how she acts in the tub. This evening, I could see the anxiety starting to fill her as she began to whimper and back away from me. I invited her to lie down on her bed with me and Teddy Bear, with the idea of rubbing her back and talking softly to her in order to calm her down. To my surprise, she came onto the bed, sat next to me, reached for my hands, and said "Mommy, let's pray?" Oh, my heart just melted and I was filled with such joy! I was beaming inside and felt like I could cry! She made the connection that when she feels overwhelmed, she should turn to Jesus in prayer!

So, now that we're refreshed on the brain and why we need to connect with our kids, and we've heard a story to encourage us let's get into the how of connection:

1. How do your kids signal to you that they're having a hard time?

Take a minute to describe what happens when your child is in emotional overwhelm. What do they look like? What do they do? Feel free to use the list and add others of your own.

- Screaming
- Crying
- Throwing things
- Lashing out verbally
- Whining
- Hitting
- Hurting themselves
- Seething anger
- Hurting others
- Slamming doors
- Sulking
- Sarcasm
- Flushed face
- Clenched fists
- Stomping feet
- Loss of language
- Rolling eyes
- Physical complaints (stomach ache, headache...)

Usually the first thing we think about when our child is freaking out is how to get them to stop. Their behavior is embarrassing, annoying, irritating, etc., and we want it to end as quickly as possible. And we've been told we need to discipline the behavior so that learn not to do it. But as you look at the list, could any of those behaviors actually be signals of something more than just your kids trying to push your buttons? [Are they screaming because you took them to the grocery store during nap time? Are they hitting because you haven't paid any attention to them all morning? Are they rolling their eyes at you because a friend said something hurtful to them at school?]

We tend to make assumptions when usually there's an underlying cause, a **why**, for their behavior. Your kids' inappropriate behavior then is not an attack on you or sign that they are a bad kid, but rather a message letting you know that their brain is no longer in a state of integration and they lack the skills necessary to handle the situation. Their behavior is their best strategy in the moment and they need your help to learn a better strategy, not be shamed because they don't know what to do. It's in their freak out moments that they need us most. When we get angry, send them away or punish them, we send the message that we only like them when they are behaving well. This is not true, Christ-like love or helpful to our kids.

So let's talk about our reactions...

2. How do you typically respond to your kids when they are upset?

One of the keys to becoming better parents is self-awareness. In jobs and in school you get evaluations and marks to rate how you are doing. In parenting it's up to us to self-assess and make time to process our own skills so that we can actually realize where we need to change. If we don't stop to evaluate ourselves, we can very easily get stuck in patterns and not even realize they are wrong. That's why a key part to helping our kids is becoming aware of our own emotions too. During the character sessions with Bonnie you're going to get lots of time to think about your own triggers and work through how to give loving responses. Today we're going to think about how we generally respond to our kids when they are in overwhelm.

[Moms with infants can think about how they typically respond to other kids, their spouse or friends when they go into overwhelm.]

Think about times when your kids have melted down or reacted strongly to something – when they have showed the signs of distress you just wrote down. Jot down some of your typical negative verbal responses. They might be things like:

- *Don't worry. There's nothing to be afraid of.*
- *It's not a big deal that it broke. Just fix it.*
- *There's no reason to cry. Losing is part of the game.*
- *Homework is your job. Just focus and you'll be finished sooner.*

Also jot down your body language and non-verbal communication. [This is not about condemning yourself but rather about becoming self-aware so you can grow.]

Then think about how your child responds when you react in this way. Does it calm them down or elevate their emotions? Does it bring them to a place of openness to your teaching or does it cause them to stomp to their room and isolate themselves. Can you see long-lasting changes as a result?

There's nothing wrong with offering a logic based response - they do need logic to help them make sense of the situation – but it rarely works when a child is upset. They can't hear logic or change their behavior until they feel empathized with. When we bombard them with words and punish their behavior without getting to the heart it will end up causing shame, fear, lying and hard-heartedness. You may even think you have compliant kids now when you can control them, but this style of parenting is much scarier when they become teenagers and you can no longer control them in the same way.

So let's think about how we can react differently, and in a way that will be much more effective in the long-term.

3. How do we effectively connect with our kids? And bring them to a place of re-integration.

Connecting means attuning to your child's strong emotions which are coming from the right side and downstairs area of their brain. The right brain, when not in an integrated state won't necessarily be logical. In fact, this is often the hard part as a parent, when you have to attune to a child who is acting completely irrational and their upstairs, higher level thinking brain is shut off.

So you will need to connect primarily with non-verbal signals:

I'm going to give you time now to work through the chart in your workbook and describe different ways you can use non-verbal signals to connect or not connect. Feel free to share stories as examples as you do this.

	Creating connection	Losing Connection
Eye contact	<i>at or below child's eye level</i>	<i>Stand over them</i>
Facial expression	<i>Relaxed face</i>	<i>Frown, pursed lips, aggressive look</i>
Tone of voice	<i>Calm, soft comforting</i>	<i>Tense, loud angry</i>
Posture	<i>Relaxed shoulders, open hands, kneeling</i>	<i>Arms crossed, hands on hips, leaning forward</i>
Gestures	<i>Gently touches, hugs</i>	<i>Wagging finger, throwing arms up</i>
Timing of response	<i>Letting child finish, asking questions</i>	<i>Interrupting, long intimidating pauses</i>
Intensity of response	<i>Staying calm, being patient</i>	<i>Yelling, crying, loud voice</i>

When we use good non-verbal signals to create connection, we help our kids feel safe, protected and understood. This then helps them calm and come to a place where their brain can re-integrate. Once their big emotions have calmed, you can even do things like playing a game, reading a book, being silly, going for a walk, coloring or drawing, etc. to help their brain reset. Then we instruct, re-direct, and discipline effectively. [We will talk about this instruction step 2 sessions from now.]

If you aren't feeling empathy for your child it will be hard to do these non-verbal signals effectively. You can start by faking it. Sometimes you can fake it till you make it, meaning if you act a certain way your attitude can come into line. But usually your kids know when you are faking it and this doesn't work. One trick is to try and put yourself in their shoes. Not necessarily for the exact thing they are in overwhelm for, but for a way that you experience that same emotion. Like if they are sad about something, being able to remember a time when you felt sad, and what that was like will help you connect to their sadness. This is what Bonnie is going to be teaching you to do with the character sessions she'll take you through. So you can look forward to that in the next session.

Before we move on to the practical application, I'll share a few connecting stories from my life.

Stories:

Eden: every Friday is storying writing day at our house. Eden is in grade 1 so usually she draws out her story first, then dictates it to me, I write it and then she copies it. One particular Friday I decided she was doing well enough to start writing her stories out on her own. When I told her this she threw her story paper at me and flopped on the floor very dramatically with tears. My first instinct was to use logic and tell her "you print lots of things on your own already; you are good at spelling; you have a great imagination; you're in grade 1 and this should be your level; etc." I knew that this wouldn't connect to her heart though so instead I thought about why she responded so strongly. What came to mind was how she was expecting to do it the way we always did and my decision to change things came as a shock. Writing out her own story would take more effort on her part which then felt overwhelming. In the past I would have thought she needed to respect my decision as her teacher and mom and obey without question. I could have done it that way – and that wouldn't have been wrong or traumatic - but she would have done it with a hard heart. We would have all endured an hour of whining, complaining, and slow story writing. This would have elevated everyone's emotional temperatures and could have even caused stress for the rest of the day. And as I thought about it further, I knew I was in the wrong because I should have explained this to her in advance instead of springing it on her. I knew I would hate it if someone did this to me. So instead of demanding she do it my way, I apologized. I said sorry and that I should have let her know before she started that this is what I wanted her to try this time. I told her we could do it again together that week and then next time she could try on her own. Well, the result was that she picked up the booklet, walked to the school room and wrote her own story in about 15 min. She nicely asked for help with a few words but the rest she did by herself with a good attitude. Then later I went back and talked to her with 'logic' that the next time I ask her to do something she wasn't expecting that instead of going straight to anger she can try to catch herself and nicely ask for help or express herself with words. That's the redirect part that we'll come back to in 2 sessions.

Charlie – one Monday morning I came home from a run. Kris had been doing school with the kids and as I came in the door Charlie asked if he had to do piano. I told him yes and that there was also a written theory page he had to do. At this point he completely flipped out! My spirit went to anger but I didn't respond because I needed to go to the bathroom. This 'break' gave me a moment to think about his reaction which seemed especially over the top. It was then that the Holy Spirit gave me an 'aha' moment. I had this thought that he may have tried to surprise me by having already done his piano practicing by the time I came home (which he sometimes does). When I told him there was a theory page it ruined the surprise because it meant he wasn't done. I came out of the bathroom and asked him if this is what happened to which he nodded yes. I apologized for ruining the surprise and told him that I would hate that too. We worked on the theory page together and then talked about how he could have communicated better with me when I came home.

Boaz – one beautiful summer day Kris and I wanted to go for a walk. The older kids were playing with the neighbors but Boaz needed to come with us. When we told him to come get in the stroller he melted down. He did NOT want to go in the stroller and refused to come. Instead of getting upset or disciplining him for not listening, Kris sat and hugged him. At first he was rigid and did not like it. But as Kris took some slow deep breaths Boaz's body calmed and his crying got quieter. Kris then re-told the story to Boaz: how he was playing with his friends and having so much fun and didn't want to stop to go in the stroller. He told Boaz that this must have made him angry and sad. Kris sat with him for a little while and then Boaz, of his own free will, got up and calmly walked to the stroller.

Joy – a couple of weeks ago I caught Joy in a lie. She had asked for a snack before bed and took something that I told her she probably wouldn't like. It was just a bun with p.b. and honey but it had been out all day and I knew it wouldn't taste good. She took it anyway saying she'd like it. I was in the kitchen washing up some dishes and a few minutes later she got up and said she needed to quickly go to the bathroom, taking the bun with her. While she was in the bathroom I had the sneaking suspicion that she was going to hide the food or flush it. Sure enough, when she came out the food was gone and she said she was done. Conveniently I had had time to think about my reaction and how I wanted to talk to her about hiding this. I didn't freak out or get angry and was able to get out of her that she had in fact lied. We then role-played how she could have handled this differently and talked about the importance of telling the truth. She's not a chronic liar so I didn't discipline her this time. I know I've done my share of yelling causing her to want to hide things and I need to be the one to rebuild trust with her. I saw fruit from this just a few days ago when she found her ipod on Eden's bed. Instead of getting mad at her, she calmly asked her why it was there. Then we were able to work with Eden on an appropriate consequence.

Application:

Think of a time when your child went into a state of overwhelm and you didn't connect to them. Describe what happened. Think about why your child might have reacted the way they did. How could you respond differently next time? Is there a repair you need to make? Ask Jesus for any further thoughts for you on this.