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Special Time

A sense of connection confers real powers on your child. It grants him the ability to think, to cooperate, to feel good about himself and the people around him. It opens up avenues to learning. And it helps him develop judgment over time. Want your child to be a good friend to others? Build his sense of connection. Want him to be brave? Nurture his sense of connection. Want him to be able to amuse himself part of the time? Plump up his sense of connection. Want him to know right from wrong? Keep restoring his sense of connection. Then he’ll learn to catch himself before

whomping on a friend in anger, or sneaking the guinea pig into his room and losing it there. Special Time, the first Listening Tool, will help you to keep this bond of connection strong.

In Special Time, you set aside some time—from three minutes to an hour—and your *child* tells you the recipe for reaching her. You say when and where you’ll have time to connect. Your child tells you how. Special Time can be occasional or even a daily practice, depending on your family. Either way, as Dr. Lawrence J. Cohen says, it’s meant to “fill your child’s cup” with connection.

**WHAT SETS SPECIAL TIME APART?**

You may be thinking, "But I already do a lot of special time with my kids! I take them to the park on weekends, let them splash and play in the bath, sing with them. They get to run around a lot more than I did. We have a lot of fun times together." You're right! Those times are important. But those times won't have the same effect as Special Time. You enjoy your children as they splash in the tub, but if the phone rings, you answer it. If your partner enters the bathroom to discuss the neighbor’s noisy music, you converse. All day long, many things can and do distract you.

In Special Time, you focus on just one child. You make arrangements for your other children, and the phone is off limits. In Special Time, unlike normal life, your child runs the show. You do set the conditions: for example, Special Time will be for fifteen minutes, we can go inside or outside, but no car today, and we won’t spend money. The rest is up to your child, and you’ll see him become quite creative in directing things. You’ll discover what tickles his fancy each time. In Special Time, the spotlight of your attention shines full and steady on just him. So when you’re having a hard day and you don’t have much patience, you do a short Special Time. On easier days, you can be more generous.

And in Special Time, there’s always a start and an end. Your child looks forward to the start of it. Many parents look forward to the end. A commitment to a limited period of time will give you unusual tolerance.

For instance, say that your child somehow gets into chewing up soda crackers in the back yard and blowing the dry crumbs out of his mouth to make snow. Though you’re a fastidious person, you can manage to chuckle and admire his creation. Wisely, you promised him just ten minutes, so you can almost enjoy seeing soda-cracker snow cover the grass. You pat yourself on the back—yes, he loves messes, but at least he’s creative! And for ten minutes, you can handle it.

You could think of the majority of the time you spend with your child as the nourishing milk of parenting. Special Time is like the cream. It adds an important quality—emotional safety—to your relationship. But all cream would be too rich for both of you!

What can you accomplish with Special Time? You will soon find out. Parents I know have used just five minutes of it to turn a clingy child at a party into one who can go play with the other children; to sate their child’s fascination with matches, thus making their family life safer; to dispel their child’s edginess at family gatherings; to help children release fears of many kinds; to help a child reconnect with a separated parent after long times apart; to help their child heal from trauma; to help a sibling adjust to the new baby; to provide an energy outlet for their aggressive child; and to dispel a child’s fear of medical procedures. It’s an almost infinitely flexible

tool.