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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 him. 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 refuse to be distracted. 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 as the spotlight of your attention shines on him. You'll discover what tickles his fancy each time. On a day when you haven't got much patience, you can set up a short Special Time. On an easier day, you can be more generous.

There's always a start and an end to Special Time. 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 greater tolerance for the interesting things your child chooses to do. 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 originality. 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. You'll read lots of examples in this book, but you and your child will develop your own path. 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. You can begin to alleviate nearly any behavioral hitch that's got you baffled or irritated, using this Listening Tool.

Here's how one frustrated mother used Special Time to create much-needed change.



I dreaded our mornings. They left an emotional scar on me every day. Nobody wanted to be rushed, and the cooperation was nil. "Please brush your teeth," I would say. I was met with, "I am not going to school!" "I am not brushing my teeth." I would say everything you are not supposed to say. "You will brush your teeth or else," "You are going to school—and now—and I don't want to hear another word about it!" I could hear my mother's words and tone coming out of my mouth. I wanted to vomit. What was I doing?!

After trying every threat and punishment I could think of, I finally started using the Hand in Hand approach. We started getting up thirty minutes early so we could *play*! I mean, *really* play! We started with Special Time. My husband and I would trade off playing with each girl so each of them got a chance with each parent. We just did twenty minutes right after breakfast, before we asked them to do that infinite list of chores before they went to school. It *worked*! They actually brushed their teeth without my threats! They even made their beds without me helping. It was amazing. Just those few minutes with them "filled up their cup" with love and attention. Yes, it takes time and effort, but it is worth it! Twenty minutes in the mornings has given me hours of peace and love.



This is a very simple tool. When you use it, you'll be rewarded with improved behavior and greater trust. Special Time accustoms your child to feeling well connected. It also attunes you to your child, so after awhile you'll anticipate difficult moments more often, and learn to plan for them. You'll know you've arrived as a parent when your child notices that he's going off track and asks for Special Time so he can reconnect, instead of spiraling down into difficult behavior.

But aside from these practical benefits, this tool enriches your relationship. You'll get to know your child inside and out. He'll show you what he likes, what he loves, what he hates, and what frightens him through Special Time. He'll come up with his own unique graduate-level course in fun, and he'll make sure you get to sample kinds of play you've never thought of! Special Time with your child will set up traditions for the two of you that you'll love and chuckle about for many years to come.

Looking ahead, the connection grooves you develop with Special Time will stand you in good stead as your child enters adolescence. You'll be able to keep some of them well-oiled and active, like creating fancy hair-dos for your daughter, or massaging your son's back just the way he likes. But the Special Time activities your teen is no longer eager to do will still stand as beacons, pointing to the most hopeful times of his childhood, and orienting him to what his own children will need from him one day.

#### WHEN TO OFFER SPECIAL TIME

Special Time helps with these kinds of parenting situations:

- **The morning routine.** Some kids migrate from one distraction to another when it's time to get ready for school or day care. Others balk. Special Time connects, so when you offer it before saying a word about what needs to get done, it can fuel your child's ability to think. And cooperate! Many parents tell us it's their go-to tool in the mornings, first thing.
- **Before other challenging times.** Before hated haircuts or shampoos. Before visiting Aunt Tilly, who is fussy about her house and isn't used to children. Before dinner. Before bedtime. Before a new baby arrives, and every day while your child adjusts to the new upstart. Before church, mosque, or temple; before Thanksgiving guests arrive; before walking into a grocery store stocked with eye-catching gum and candy. Special Time in advance isn't a surefire remedy, but after a few months of use, it will often serve to curb trouble.
- **To reconnect after school or day care.** Instead of "What did you do today?" "Nothing," you can give your child a chance to *show*

you how he is. Everything you need to know will spill out, once he feels connected.

- **Before it's time to do homework.** Special Time is a potent antidote to the rigors of school. It restores your child's sense that you're on his side.
- **To contain the activities your child loves, but you can't stand.** Special Time is a godsend for this! When your child is fascinated with cymbals made from the lids of pots and pans, you can set the timer for five minutes, pop in your earplugs, and hang in there. Special Time is a great tool if your child is into burying insects alive, is on a Barbie fashion jag, wants to practice his martial arts moves on you, or wants your help sorting through his Legos for the tiny piece he is missing. You can say, "No, not now," when you're running on fumes, but suggest a Special Time later when you figure you can be up for it.
- **When your child's behavior has gone off track.** When your child is full of complaints. When his behavior turns wild, when he's grabbing from others, or appears so starved for attention that he crawls all over you while you try to converse with a partner or friend. Special Time has a good track record in these situations. It helps your child feel seen and heard. It also tends to help you see your child in a more favorable light.
- **When your child is fearful.** For example, if school is starting in a month, and your child is afraid to go, you can do Special Time daily at his school. You may need to use other tools, as well, but Special Time can help create a sense of safety in any location or situation where your child tends to feel unsure.
- **When stress mounts in your family.** Hard times come to every family. One of your children falls ill; you lose your job; the family pet goes missing; a beloved grandparent or neighbor moves away. When tensions run high, the gift of Special Time can help you and your child focus on the positive, away from the stress that gnaws on your attention. This connection creates a strong lifeline for both of you when times are hard.



### HOW TO DO SPECIAL TIME

Here are the features of Special Time. Each one is important. Together, they'll make for positive change in your family.

- **Name it.** Any name will do, but there has to be a name. "Special Time;" "Daddy-and-Noah Time;" "Kids Rule Time." Naming it emphasizes that the time is theirs, and you intend to pay full attention. It helps you focus, and sharpens your child's awareness that your attention is all his.
- **If possible, set a date and a time.** Then, keep your word. Anticipation helps make the time memorable. It also gives your child time to think about what he wants to do. But when life is a scramble, or when your child's behavior is spinning out of control, just announce, "Special Time!" and do it on the spur of the moment.
- **To begin, say, "It's your Special Time.** I'll play anything you want to play!" These words are hard for parents to say, but they're important. They open up broad vistas for your child. They also they pry you out of the "I need to be in control" mindset. The break can be refreshing.
- **Set a timer.** Special Time must have a start and an end. A timer frames your attention. It also helps you out when your child chooses to do something you don't love. If you're not an exercise

buff, for example, when your child takes you out to the sidewalk and races you to the telephone pole again and again, you'll absolutely love that timer!

- **To start, offer a short time—say, five or ten minutes.** Many parents find it surprisingly difficult to let their child lead them in play. Once you're in the groove and doing short Special Times regularly, you can try offering longer times. But don't offer more than an hour, *ever*. You'll get sleepy; you'll crave a cup of coffee; you'll need to pee; you'll be itching to get out of the Sorry! game; or you'll feel like one more minute of dressing Barbie in her furs and you'll pop! Better to offer a shorter time and lengthen it at the end if you choose, than to lose focus before it's over. Your Special Time stamina will build with practice, especially if you use Listening Partnerships to work on your feelings about the things your child chooses to do.
- **Expect good things to happen.** Expect to learn something new about your child. We tend to think we know our children inside and out: the truth is, we frequently pigeonhole them without realizing it. An expectant attitude—"I wonder what will happen today"—is a vital part of Special Time. Your child may not venture far from his well-trod play path today, but keep expecting to be surprised. Your mindset matters!
- **Enjoy your child.** Offer extra warmth, extra eye contact, and show interest in his choices, even if they're the same choices he's made every day for the past two weeks. Be patient if trust builds slowly.
- **End with affection.** You've just spent time with a marvelously intelligent young person. So close with a hug or a high-five, and tell your child when the next Special Time will be.

This mother of eight shows how healing it can be to offer Special Time, even when it's highly inconvenient:





I'd just come home from working an eight-hour shift. My hours at work recently changed from mornings to evenings, and this is so hard on my three youngest girls. By the time I get home they should be in bed, sound asleep. Not this evening! It was ten o'clock and the girls were up waiting for me. Shawneece, my nine-year-old, wanted to tell me about something that happened in her class today. Sharille, who is seven, has a hard time connecting, and when she is not feeling connected she will throw tantrums and is not nice to people, especially her sisters. It was way past my two-year-old's bedtime and she wanted to be held and loved. I was feeling tired, and needed to unwind from a long day. At this point I needed *help*. My partner gave me a bit of time to unwind, and then I went to the girls.

So at ten thirty, I asked Shawneece to be with the two-year-old, and I began Special Time with Sharille. She could not get a word out without doing this loud annoying laugh, and for the first time, I did not tell her to stop or quiet down. I listened. She told me a little about her day at school. She shared something that had happened with some of her classmates that had upset her. She cried. Then, she came to a part where she stopped crying and clearly said, "Mom, I don't like it when you aren't home. I miss you." And more tears came. I held her and told her I missed her so much, and that I come home to her as soon as I can. I told her I loved her, and that I was so happy we were together now. We held each other, and Sharille told me that she felt happy that we were together, too.

This was the first time I was able to end Special Time with her without her crying about it being over. Then, as I transitioned to Special Time with Shawneece, her older sister, the most unusual thing happened! Sharille went in the bedroom and played with her baby sister while I had Special Time with Shawneece. There was no interruption. This was a first! Sharille *never* volunteers to play with her little sister! Shawneece had her time, then and the older girls went to bed and I was able to do Special Time with the baby, Shalea. Sharille had the biggest breakthrough that evening, and it changed how the night went for all of them.





## THE DON'TS

Because we grownups aren't always good at following a child's lead, there are some pointers on what Special Time isn't. Hold yourself strictly to these guidelines, even if it's uncomfortable at first.

- **Don't give your child advice.** Don't teach; don't point out lessons you think might be important. For example, don't search for and point out the parts of your child's scribble that look like letters of the alphabet; don't ask him to count the snail shells he's collected. Let him have his own inner purpose as he plays.
- **Don't multitask.** No picking the lint off the carpet during your game of Crazy Eights. Don't carry the folded towels to the cupboard as your child leads you to his room. Don't mull over a problem at work while your daughter is creating a tea party for you. You're in the presence of a remarkable human being. Lint, laundry, and problems at work can wait.
- **Don't talk to others.** Phone off. Don't even *think* of texting! In Special Time, you honor a great love of yours. Do it with all your heart.
- **Don't modify your child's ideas unless his safety is at risk,** and then, try to find a work-around. If he wants to play soccer in the street like the big kids do on Sunday afternoons, just say, "Today's Tuesday. There are lots of cars. Want to walk over to the park instead?" If he wants to jump out his first-floor bedroom window into the tall weeds outside, put some washable blankets or a pile of towels down, and give him your hand. Find a safe way to make his dreams come true.
- **Don't take "personal time off" in the middle of Special Time.** Before you set the timer, take a trip to the bathroom; get a drink of water; or munch on half an apple so you're ready to roll. If you still feel a strong need to make yourself more comfortable after just a short bit of Special Time, it may mean your energy reserves are low. An exchange of listening time will help replenish your own sense of your importance.

- **Don't use Special Time as a reward.** When you see how your child comes to treasure Special Time, it will seem logical to say, "Honey, we can't do Special Time until you tidy up your room." But *don't*! Your child needs the sense of connection that Special Time builds. So offer it with no strings attached, like you offer fruit and fresh water. Other Listening Tools will help you with the toys on the floor, and they'll work a heck of a lot better after Special Time.

A mother who works full time outside the home explains how a little Special Time can shift a child's behavior.



My five-year-old son and I have a busy life. Unfortunately, as a single mom, I find myself rushing him through a bedtime routine after getting home late from our activities. Our deal was that he could play while I got his bath together, but after his bath he would always need to hurry to bed if he wanted a book. Well, upon arriving home, he would play, then complain that he wanted TV time, too. Then he would tell me that he wanted cereal before his bath and that he wasn't tired. The struggle got worse week by week.

Why wouldn't he listen to me? I realized that he had no time to connect with me before bedtime, with my rushing him around. I decided to get him home early and offer him Special Time. I told him I would set the timer for ten minutes so that we could do whatever he wanted. His eyes lit up. "Mama! I want you to throw me on the bed, then I want you and me to roll on the floor together!"

I set the timer and ran with him to the bedroom to throw him on the bed. For eight minutes, I joyfully tossed him on the bed, admiring his many different landings and the postures he took as he flew. He laughed and screamed, "Again, Mama!" After the ten-minute timer sounded, he realized that we hadn't rolled. I reminded him that Special Time was over. I said that I would love to roll for a while but that I might need to get up and start making his bath. He agreed and we rolled and laughed some more. After a couple minutes I excused myself and told him that he could play while I made his bath.

I called him in for his bath and was surprised—the rest of the night went smoothly. He took his bath, came out when I asked, brushed his teeth, put his pajamas on by himself, we read a book, and then he went to sleep. He was warm, agreeable, and connected.



And Special Time works well all the way into the teen years. One mother of a fourteen-year-old decided to give him his first Special Time for an hour right after church on Sunday. He wanted to go fishing off the city pier. So they went straight there when church was over. Although fishing was not this mom's favorite activity, she was game.

They bought some worms, and he said, "Mom, I want you to put the worm on the hook." She protested, saying she couldn't possibly put the worm on the hook. He knew he'd tweaked her, so he laughed and kept challenging her. Another fisherman there began to smile at the two of them, and made a brief comment in Spanish. Her son replied, also in Spanish, and the two of them shared a few jokes. They conversed awhile. The fisherman walked over and gave the mom a lesson, in Spanish, on how to put a worm on a hook. She squealed as she tried, and they all laughed. The mom watched her son in admiration. She said she had never heard him speak Spanish before, and the fact that he conversed so easily with this man changed her whole image of "her little boy." Finally, her son put his line in the water, and the two of them leaned on the railing, the boy fishing, his mom paying attention and listening in case he might want to talk.

After an hour, they packed up their gear, said goodbye to the fisherman they had befriended, and got into their car. On the way home, the son told his mom that he wanted permission to ride his bike to a park a few miles from their home, where some of his friends meet. She had always forbidden this, fearing for his safety. Today, she listened to him with a fresh perspective. Seeing him out on the pier, the master of a language she didn't know, and easily making friends in it, made her realize that perhaps her own judgment needed adjustment. So as they talked, she shared her concerns with him. She asked him to commit to a few safety guidelines, and he agreed. She gave him permission to ride to that park when he wanted.

When they got home, her son was elated, and he, too, had a new attitude. He cleaned up the kitchen without being asked, something he had never done. This mother said she would never see him as “her little boy” again. And she vowed to do Special Time again soon.

#### WHEN YOU USE SPECIAL TIME REGULARLY

When you give your child Special Time on a regular basis, he will show you more about himself, how he sees the world, and how he feels. You will probably see one or more of the following signs that your child is feeling safer with you.

**You may be tested.** Your child may choose play that you find boring or irritating. He will be aware, at some level, that he is pushing you out of your comfort zone. But when you decide to play along, he’ll be greatly encouraged. One good way to deal with your own reluctance is to protest in a comical way. When your child splashes water onto the kitchen floor, for example, you can gasp, throw your hands up, and say, “Yikes! It’s raining in here! What’s going on?” Your child will laugh because you’re easing the tension, and the game will be on! The delight your child shows as you sputter and squawk will be well worth the two minutes of mop-up you have to do when the timer goes off. He may even decide to help you with that part. There is more about winning your child’s laughter with your playful protest in Chapter 6, *Playlistening*.

- **Your child may explore new activities or new territory.** For instance, children love to use the safety of adult attention to test their physical powers. So your child may jump on the bed in every possible way; squeeze into the smallest hiding space he can find; walk much farther than he’s ever walked before; or wade into a nearby mud puddle up to his knees. He’ll use your permission to do intensive, whole-bodied learning.
- **Your child may raise important issues.** Your warm, relaxed attitude makes it safe enough to address experiences that didn’t sit well with him. For example, if he recently got a painful shot at the doctor’s, he may dig out the turkey baster and eagerly give you shot after pretend shot. Or if he was scolded at school, he may play “teacher” and lord it over you, sending you into Time

Out. You can try playfully cringing or begging for mercy when he adopts the powerful role. Don't be too earnest—it's play, after all! If laughter erupts, he's busy resolving some tension.

- **Your child may show an increasing attachment to you.** You may notice some positive changes such as increased affection, hopefulness, and excitement about life, along with the sharing of thoughts and accomplishments. Your child may want even more of your healing attention. So—sorry to break this news—feelings of dependency or fears you thought he'd outgrown may reappear. You may be irritated, thinking that he has regressed. But this is what progress looks like! He feels safe enough now to ask for some help with his unfinished business.
- **Your child may become upset at the end of Special Time,** or shortly thereafter. Feeling safer with you means that bottled-up feelings rise to the surface more easily. Plan for this. If you've got a half hour of time to devote to him, you might want to offer him just ten minutes of Special Time. If he melts down, heartbroken that Special Time is over until tomorrow, love him with listening. Don't try to fix the problem. He actually needs this small disappointment in order to scrub long-held feelings out of his system. After you've listened several times, his emotional backlog won't be as great, and he'll be able to end Special Time without protest.

Over time, Special Time will teach you to read your child's body language and signals more accurately. Here's the kind of change one mother noticed as she made Special Time a part of her family's life:



When I first started doing Special Time, I hated it—it seemed to be such a chore. Over time, though, I grew to enjoy Special Time with my girls.

I began to see the patterns in their off-track behavior. I could almost predict when trouble would happen, and I started to be able to tell why. I was becoming attuned to my kids in a way I never had been before. It was so beautiful.

For example, I noticed that when we went to an event where the kids were playing with other children and we were engaged with adults, my

kids went off track when it was over. During these gatherings they would be playing happily and having a good time. Before doing Special Time, I couldn't understand why they would tantrum and whine afterward. I soon realized how disconnected they became from my husband and me at these events. It made sense that they felt detached from us, as we spent several hours mostly away from them. I realized that we were in the same place at the same time and seemingly "together," but we were not *together*.

So I began doing short Special Times before and after parties or outings that involved lots of other people. It made the biggest difference during our hours together after the events! It was so easy and simple, and yet it took me awhile to figure it out.



#### FINDING TIME FOR SPECIAL TIME

Time is a sore point with parents! Almost all of us feel pressured. But there's no one rule about how much Special Time to offer, or how to manage to do it when you have multiple children. If you can't figure out how in the world to fit it in, it will help to find a good listener. Talk about what's good in your life, and what's hard. Allow feelings to roll. Rant and curse, if you need to, about how stretched you are. It's hard to solve problems when you feel that no one understands the situation you face. Uninterrupted time to think and feel, while your listener offers warm attention, will make a difference. The insights that come to you will be yours—no book can offer you better thinking than you come up with when someone listens! The oxygen mask drops for you first. Then, and only then, is it time to turn and help your child.

That said, some parents do five minutes of Special Time each morning, waking one child up early, while the others are asleep. Some do Special Time on Saturday or Sunday, when their partner can be with the other children. What I did as a single mom was to have a friend of both my sons come over once or twice a week after school. He would play with one son, and I'd do Special Time with the other. Then I'd take the second son, while the first played with the friend. After both my sons had had Special Time, they could play together well, so I'd give their friend the same amount of Special Time. This made him part of our family.

One two-job mom I know said to her Kindergartner, “While I walk you to school, you can do anything you want! It’s your Special Time.” She would beam at him, and he came up with new ways to use her attention every day. The connection they felt grew, along with his cooperation. What an elegant solution to an extreme time-crunch!

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While scheduled Special Time is key tool for building and maintaining a close connection with your child, it can also be used strategically throughout your parenting day to resolve specific issues. In Part III, Solutions to *Everyday Parenting Challenges*, you will read about parents who have used Special Time to help their children with separation, aggression, fear, sibling struggles, cooperation, and many related issues. Their stories will encourage you, but your experience will be unique. Your child has good things in store for you. So go ahead. Put down the book and give Special Time a try!