



What's That One Thing? Stefanie Armstrong MS, LIMHP

Take a moment to consider: What's one consistent relationship ritual you do with your child almost daily? As a busy mom, I got to thinking about how there seem to be days that pass where I haven't *intentionally made a connection* with each of my boys. Things just move so fast and I find myself being taken away by the tide of life. So.... I ask, what is your "one thing," your "relationship ritual."

Rituals in relationships are such a vital piece for connection. Think for a minute about one of your important adult relationships. Now think for a moment about a ritual you have with this other person(s). Take a minute to consider how this ritual holds you together in a positive healthy way. These rituals could be simple, like a facial expression that only you and the loved one know about and see, a special nickname you call this person, a favorite food you share or a funny story you share. Consider how these connect you on a very personal level.

For babies born into secure, safe environments, rituals are naturally created in the very first year of life. Calm, consistent, predictable, rituals like rocking before bed, a specific song the baby hears daily, a bath after breakfast and so on. Routines and rituals are a vital part of an infant's and toddler's life creating a sense of safety and predictability.

Now consider a child with attachment trauma. Some of the rituals they learned in their early lives were damaging and hurtful. But they were, after all, rituals...predictable. The traumatized child, as a baby, may have experienced chaos, inconsistent, unpredictable rituals. What is learned is repeated, leading the wounded child to attempt to redo these unhealthy relationship rituals. Babies and toddlers who have not experienced consistent routines and rituals early in life desperately need them, even though they are older now. The young brain acclimates to the experience, safe or unsafe. It cannot escape so it acclimates; adapts to its environment to survive. Your child may be trying to recreate the unhealthy rituals learned within the earliest attachment relationships -- with you. So what does this lead to? Your child continues to try out these unhealthy rituals... and they don't work!

Your traumatized child must learn new, healthy relationship rituals. These rituals should take place even if there has been a 2-hour meltdown over socks! Not just occasionally, but *consistently and intentionally*.

Here are some ideas:

1. **Give 'em a wink, a handshake, or both:** Whether it's a wink or a special look or a secret handshake, create some kind of facial expression/non-verbal expression that only you and your child share.
2. **Yo! You da bomb.com:** Ok so teens hate it, and secretly love it, when we adults use their slang in funny ways. With your teen or preteen have a funny "cool" thing you say to them...not around their friends of course!
3. **Take it to the streets:** Taking a 5 or 10 minute walk or ride around the block goes a long way. Teens, especially, will talk more when you're on the move.
4. **Find common ground:** Find something, food or a fun drink, or even a special T.V. show that you both like and attempt to share this time together--if not weekly, at least a couple times a month.
5. **Note it:** Send a text or a special emoji each day that only you and your teen share.
6. **You pick:** Allow your child to choose dinner once or twice a month. Put it on the calendar and let your child choose what's on the menu.
7. **Till we meet again:** Create a parting ritual (see #1) and do it every time you part.
8. **Reunited:** Create a reunion ritual (see #1) and do it each time you reconnect.

This is not an extensive list, but *the overall goal is to create an intentional, consistent, creative ritual that fits for you and your child*. These can be family rituals and individual rituals. Keeping them simple, quick and doable is the goal because it's about the relationship and changing deeply rooted patterns of unhealthy relationship rituals to lifelong healthy relationship rituals.

So, what's your ONE thing? Take some time to create a few--it will pay off in the long run.