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The Secret to Raising Confident Children? Quality Time With Parents

Studies show that setting aside just 10-15 minutes a day for an engaged interaction can make a big difference.

By Daryl Austin Updated Jan. 18, 2025 12:02 am ET



ILLUSTRATION: JARRED BRIGGS

As concerns abound about the mental health of children and adolescents, parents are getting [all sorts of advice](#). Should we ban phones or just social media? Try pharmaceuticals or wean kids off them? Find a therapist or hire a “life coach” instead?

The [prescriptions for helping kids](#) become healthier, less anxious and more self-possessed are as varied as the kids themselves. But what if the answer is actually simple? According to

a growing body of research, one of the best ways to raise confident children is for parents to spend more quality time with them.

“The child who feels secure, safe and seen within their intimate home environment will be the one who is able to go out into the world, take risks, engage more fully and form healthy relationships,” said Dr. Shefali Tsabary, a clinical psychologist and the author of “The Conscious Parent” and “The Awakened Family.”

Parents who are [already feeling harried](#) may feel put out by calls to spend more “on” time with their kids. But building this confidence—particularly when kids are young and their brains and self-image are developing—can actually make life easier for everyone by getting to the roots of worrisome behavior.

The key is to focus on quality time, not quantity. Instead of spending whole afternoons in the company of children while also cleaning the house and fielding emails, Tsabary said that setting aside just 10-15 minutes a day for an engaged interaction, such as going for a walk or throwing a ball, can make a big difference.

“When we connect with our kids one-on-one, we are sending them the message that they are interesting and worthy of commanding our full attention,” echoed Dr. Becky Kennedy, a clinical psychologist and the author of “Good Inside: A Guide to Becoming the Parent You Want to Be.”

Kennedy noted that children usually have a sense of the many demands on a parent’s time, so when a mother or father drops everything to be fully present—even for just a few minutes at a time—we are letting them know that they matter more. “This builds confidence and a true sense of their value more than just about anything else we can do,” she said.

Danielle Taylor, an administrative assistant in Houston, Tex., couldn’t understand why her 9-year-old son was acting out in class and falling behind in his schoolwork. She vented to her therapist, who suggested that she try spending more time with him. Taylor began giving her son more hugs and sitting next to him while he ate breakfast. She and her husband also spent longer reading and talking with him before bed.

Within three weeks, he was back on track in school and getting along better with everyone. His teacher “noticed such a big difference, she emailed me to find out what had changed,” Taylor said.

Because I work from home, I’m able to be around my four children, ages 6 to 13, more than many working dads, but I’ve discovered this doesn’t mean all that much if I’ve always got one eye on my inbox. A few years ago, I decided to leave my phone in a different room whenever I made time for my children. This simple step made space for more meaningful connections. It also helped my kids feel more comfortable coming to me with their problems because they knew I was paying attention.

My after-school chats with my oldest daughter were once hurried and full of distractions. But when I began carving out 10-15 minutes of one-on-one time with her when she first got home each day, I learned much more about what she was going through. I discovered she had fallen in with a group of friends who were engaged in behavior she found unsettling, such as watching risqué videos on social media. Sensing our daughter felt uncomfortable and a little trapped, my wife and I were able to coach her toward a new group of friends in a way that avoided hurting anyone's feelings.

Beside improving my relationship with my daughter, these investments of time also curbed some of the ways she acted out at home. She began using more respectful language and helping out more with housework. She also recently shared that one of the 13-year-old girls from her former friend group is now cutting herself while another is pregnant. "I'm so glad I'm not dealing with all of that," she told me. I am, too.

Experiences like these are borne out by data. Studies consistently show that children who spend time engaging with and learning from their parents tend to be less anxious and lonely and more empathetic and in control of their emotions.

[A 2018 study](#) in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, which tracked the effects of an early childhood home on the self-esteem of over 8,700 participants over nearly 20 years, found that attentive parenting in a safe environment was a key predictor of self-esteem in young adults.

More time with parents can [protect against](#) the onset of depression in adolescents, and it can also lessen the symptoms in kids who are already depressed, according to [a 2019 study](#) of 41 teens who had experienced at least one depressive episode, published in the Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology.

For the best results, researchers suggest that parents enter their child's world of interests rather than the other way around. "Confidence-building play is child-directed play," Kennedy said. When children entice a parent to join them in a game or experience, they feel their interests and ideas have real merit. It is also a way for parents to show that they not only love their children "but also want to be a part of their world," said Amanda Zayde, a psychologist and associate director of psychology training at Montefiore Medical Center in New York.

Brandon Martinez, a father of two in Gulfport, Miss., told me that he and his 14-year-old son always had an easy bond over baseball, playing catch and watching ballgames. "But I realized I was connecting with my younger son less and less because he just doesn't share the same interest," said Martinez. His 11-year-old son preferred to play with Lego bricks, so Martinez made an effort to join him. "I was amazed at how much more it brought him out of his shell," he said.

Modest investments of time can yield other unexpected benefits. A few months ago my 6-year-old son began smelling his hands whenever he got excited. He'd be running around, laughing and sniffing. My wife and I learned that kids often develop tics like this in response to stress, anxiety or an overwhelming emotion. We then realized that, as the

youngest of our kids, he hadn't had as much quality one-on-one time with either of us as his older siblings.

We began setting aside more time with him, playing basketball in the driveway or building with magnetic blocks. We also spent an extra 5-10 minutes as we tucked him in at night, talking about the highs and lows of his day. After two weeks, our son not only stopped compulsively smelling his hands but was also throwing fewer tantrums and picking fewer fights with his siblings.

Most parents can manage to devote a little time each day to mindfully meet their kids where they are. "I'm still as busy as ever," said Taylor, the mom in Texas. "But spending more time together has not only improved his life socially and in school, it has also made me a happier mother to be around."

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