



Deerfield Parent Network

“Network Notes”

John Duffy
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Dr. Duffy will answer email requests for information at johngduffy@aol.com. His book, *The Available Parent; Radical Optimism for Raising Teens and Tweens*, is available in bookstores.

The term “available parent” does not simply mean being “present” for your children. A parent can be right next to his or her child and not be *emotionally* available; i.e., if that parent is looking at a TV, computer or cell phone screen, or even if that parent is thinking about what to make for dinner or how to handle things at work the next day, he or she is not truly available. An available parent is *present in the here and now*.

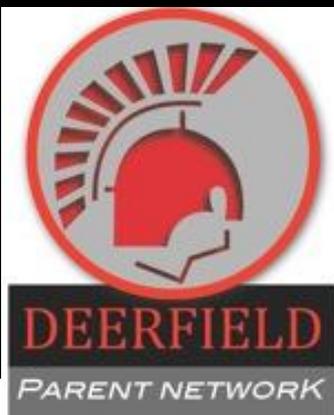
Every relationship in our lives has an “emotional bank account.” The good news about the parent-child relationship is that it is always open to a positive deposit in the emotional bank account. If you feel there is a problem in your relationship with your child, consider that there might be a negative balance in the emotional bank account. First work on your connection with your child, then work on the problems that you perceive exist. Always remember that the child you see may not be the child others see in school, etc. This negative emotional bank account could be contributing to the child’s attitude toward you.

Duffy presented a case study to illustrate how **fear, ego, and judgment** on the part of a parent can cause a disconnect in the parent-child relationship. In the example, a father feared his child would not measure up to the children of his brother; his ego drove this fear, and the message to his child was one of judgment that the child just wasn’t good enough. The parent was no longer truly “available” to his child, and his behavior resulted in the child pulling away from the parent, thus making their disconnect “official.” Fear, ego and judgment are the three most destructive emotions to good parenting.

No matter what the crisis or issue you are having with your child, if you are **open, non-judgmental, and curious**, you will find a way to solve the problem. Use the times when you are not in a “crisis” mode with your child to build up the emotional bank account.

Rules pertaining to a child’s health and safety are most important in every household. Compliance to these types of rules are paramount. With a controlled voice and presence of mind, restate the rules that pertain and be willing to issue consequences for non-compliance. When in conflict with your child, evaluate if the situation falls into this category. If the situation falls outside the health and safety category, continually self-evaluate by asking yourself, “Whose needs are being met during this exchange?” or “Am I willing to let this go?” In the end, you are trying to create the optimal dynamic in your relationship with your child.

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Do you feel at war with your child some days? Try not to be harsh and critical as this increases the tension in your home and decreases your credibility as an effective parent. Think of the word parenting as a verb. Remember, the power of your parenting always lies in your connection with your child. You may get false compliance if you are confrontational, but it will deplete the emotional bank account and eventually lead to your child disengaging from you. Empower your children by setting appropriate expectations and holding them accountable to being the best kid they can be.

When teens reach the age of experimentation, parents' anxiety levels typically go up. Today's parents have the added stress of dealing with myriad new technology, and we are the pioneers in having to deal with this. Anxious parents are more likely to make poor decisions, often overreacting by excessively clamping down and limiting the amount of unfiltered information coming into their kids' lives. This is a futile effort. This is when parents do things that *never work*: they lecture, micro-manage, coddle and bribe. These behaviors rob our kids of the chance to prove themselves as **competent, resilient and responsible**.

Instead of being an unwitting, lecturing enemy to your kids, Duffy advocates being a consultant and an ally – behaviors that enrich the emotional bank account. Trust that your teens are already well aware of your values. You would be surprised how much they can recite your core values. You don't have to be a tiger parent, or a helicopter parent, just be yourself and let your kids experience the natural consequences of their behavior. Your #1 job is to raise them to be competent, resilient and responsible. Perfection is overrated and unattainable. Children must be able to make mistakes and fail so that they can learn to cope.

Parents may think the worst thing that can happen is that their kid gets a B, or hangs out with the wrong group of kids, but the worst thing that can happen is that parents lose their connection with their child.

How do you make a teen available if he or she isn't interested in spending “quality time” with his or her parents? Work to be available to your teen or tween over the long haul. Though it may take a long time for it to happen, once your child realizes that **you** are truly available to him or her, you will be in the position to parent as an ally and consultant, and thus, you will have achieved your most important role as a parent.

If a (high-school age) child is failing a class, let the onus be on that child to find a way to fix the problem. If they don't learn to do that now, and they get to college and hit the wall there, the consequences will be far worse. When a child is stumbling academically, parents should not unilaterally punish the child for getting a poor grade; that closes off any chance for a dialog between parent and child that could lead to understanding the factors that are really causing the problem.

If your child is acting like a “spoiled brat”, try not to react in the moment. Wait until you are calm, then explain that from that point on, you and the child will have a “new contract.” If he or she behaves in an unacceptable manner, you will simply **walk away**. After all, if your child behaved this way in the “real world”, that would be a natural consequence.

Questions? Email deerfieldparentnetwork@gmail.com