



Dr. Ethan Eisen, PhD

One of the most common questions that parents ask me is “how do I feel more connected to my child?”

Particularly as their child advances into middle school and high school, many parents feel that they are losing touch with their child. This sentiment goes beyond the typical developmental changes that many children experience, as friendships gain greater importance in their lives, and family relationships may play a smaller role. Parents often feel disengaged, and they struggle to figure out ways to reconnect with their children.

Of course, there are strategies for having more effective communication, which have been the focus of previous columns. Parents also can schedule family time and activities together without distractions from electronics. In addition to these valuable methods for fostering connection between parents and their child, parents

are sometimes surprised that I suggest something a little different: playfulness.

What is meant by playfulness? One popular explanation found in research literature is that “parental playfulness describes a parent’s ability to act in a spontaneous, amusing, flexible and creative manner in different parent-child situations.” Recent studies have found that when parents show a playful side, their children seem to see better results across several important areas of development and functioning, such as the child’s ability to regulate their own emotions, and a decline in anxiety.

I also find that parental playfulness can be extremely effective in building a sense of connection with one’s child. If we consider what goes into being playful, we can appreciate that many elements of playfulness promote improved understanding and connection between a parent and his child. In order to be playful the parent has to be present—both physically and mentally. Through being playful, the parent



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is also sharing of himself, displaying to his child what he finds funny and amusing. In a similar way, the parent must consider what the child finds entertaining, which helps the parent be mindful of his child's interests and personality. In many instances, parental playfulness will lead to a child looking for opportunities to reciprocate and initiate playfulness with the parent.

On a practical level, playfulness can look very different for each parent. Some children may enjoy small pranks; other kids may like puns or wordplay; some children may get excited by spontaneous competitions or games; others may appreciate general silliness. According to many views, we employ this type of approach at the Pesach seder—many haggadot instruct the leader of the *Seder* to remove the *Seder* plate at the beginning of *maggid*, as if to say, “okay, we’re all done, time for bed!” This playfulness, which precedes the “*mah nishtanah*,” is meant to engage the children to ask questions to their parents. A model of playfulness I have in mind is my wife’s Zeidy, who in his 90s would engage toddlers with the end of his cane while he was seated on the couch. The short, spontaneous game of “catch the end of the cane” created a connection with his great-grandchildren.

Playfulness can also help to facilitate difficult conversations. Sometimes tough discussions with your child are avoided because there is a certain emotional heaviness that both you and your child find

extremely uncomfortable. When used well, playfulness is not a way to escape from a difficult conversation or make light of a certain issue, rather it can be used strategically to take away some of the intensity or pressure.

For many of us, the many roles and pressures of day-to-day life detract from our being playful. Our minds are often focused on earning a living and affording ever-increasing expenses. We try to guide our children to succeed in school and in their social lives; we may be involved in our community or have social responsibilities; we maintain our homes; and we also try to make time for our own needs and interests. But finding opportunities to be playful with our children, toddlers and teenagers alike, can help us feel more connected to our children, and help them feel more connected to us. ■

Dr. Ethan Eisen, PhD is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist (Israel and U.S.) offering Evidence-Based Solutions for Individuals and Couples

Feel free to send in any parenting questions you may have to parenting@ouisrael.org (Details will be changed to preserve anonymity).

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