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WHEN BOUNDARIES HINDER BONDING

BY JONATHAN MCKEE 📅 APRIL 29, 2020



Rules are important, but connecting with your teen is essential.

"My 17-year-old daughter never wants to talk with me." The middle-aged mom at my parenting workshop dabbed at her eyes with a tissue as she described the parent-child relationship she had with her oldest daughter. "I don't know what to do."

I listened as the mom recalled some recent conversations with her daughter. And here I use the word conversations loosely.

"Did you finish your homework?"

"Did you clean your bathroom?"

"What time did you get home last night?"

As we talked, I could see what the problem was. This daughter didn't want to talk because it's likely that in her mind her mom was acting like a parole officer searching for malfeasance.

I had made the same mistake with my oldest child. My focus on [boundaries](#) had hindered bonding. These two parenting objectives often feel at odds with each other, but they don't have to collide.

Recognize the Balance

[Bonding and boundaries](#). Both practices are essential, yet parents tend to gravitate toward one or the other. Which way do you lean?

With my oldest, I definitely focused on boundaries. I often acted like a drill sergeant, barking orders and reminders to my son. And I noticed something: When I'd walk in the room, he'd look nervous, as if thinking, "Now what am I doing wrong?"

I had wanted to teach discipline and responsibility. But my laser [focus on boundaries](#) hurt our relationship.

As parents, we must ask ourselves: Who are our kids going to go to when they mess up or are facing a moral dilemma? Will they go to the person who seems ready to pounce on them every time they do wrong?

If there's too much weight put on boundaries, our kids won't feel safe to open up to us, and we'll miss key opportunities to teach them discernment. Indeed, when parents have a thin parent-child relationship, those kids tend to glean values and behaviors from other sources.

But the parents who bond with their kids have more opportunities to walk through life together, to process challenges and decisions. A close bond opens the doorway to applying boundaries.

Look for Natural Connections In Your Parent-Child Relationship

Think for a moment about the last time you engaged in a meaningful conversation with your teen. What initiated and fueled that conversation?

The answer that I hear more than any other is the family dinner. Dinner is one of those staple connection points for families. But there are many other opportunities. As parents, we must be on the lookout for times and places where meaningful communication occurs in our homes and be proactive to seek out these venues.

Another connection point is bedtime. One parent told me that she'd periodically return to the old routine of tucking her kids in at night, even as teens. "It usually resulted in a pleasant conversation," she wrote. "It's like sleepiness made them chattier than normal."

Observe when your teens tend to open up and engage in meaningful conversation. How can you create more of these opportunities in your weekly schedule? In what ways do you think this will improve your parent-child relationship?



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Say Yes to Opportunities to Bond

Recently, my 18-year-old daughter, Ashley, asked, "Dad, do you want to go on a bike ride?"

Put this into perspective. This is an 18-year-old asking her dad to do something with her. Many parents can count on one hand how many times their teen has asked them to hang out in any given month . . . or year.

Actually, Ashley is pretty social, and we hang out frequently. So I hesitated. My schedule was jam-packed! I thought, "Jonathan, it's completely reasonable for you to say no. She'll understand."

But I said, "Yes!"

We went on a one-hour bike ride on a river trail a few minutes from our house. And it was [one of the most rewarding times](#) I've had with Ashley in months. We literally talked for an hour without interruption. The two of us discussed movies, music, college plans, friendships, conflict, relationships, and personality types. We even talked about parenting.

All because I said yes.

Make Time to Improve Your Parent-Child Relationship

My parenting repertoire is filled with stories of feeling too busy or too overwhelmed; you probably know the feeling. We all have valid excuses. But do you know how much time the average adult spends each day soaking in entertainment media and technology? Add it up. All your TV time, computer time, time on your smartphone, time spent reading books and magazines, etc.

One study found that the average adult devotes approximately nine hours and 51 minutes per day to media and technology. So I'll speak directly here as a fellow parent who has struggled with this: Don't tell me you don't have time.

Many teens won't ask to hang out very often. So when they do, slide everything aside to make it happen. It's critical to bonding and having a strong parent-child relationship.

These opportunities often come in odd ways and at inconvenient times. And they aren't always fun. Once it was my daughter Alyssa coming in and sighing, "Dad, want to go to the DMV with me? I have to renew my license."

Woo-hoo! The DMV!

She actually wasn't even excited to hang out with me; she just didn't want to go to the DMV by herself. I snagged the opportunity. I even asked, "How about a Jamba Juice on the way home?"

Make time. Even if it turns out to be a drag.

Balancing Bonding and Boundaries as a Parent - Jonathan McKee



Take a Fast From Boundaries

You might be reading this and thinking, I'm that parent. I'm the drill sergeant. My dialogue with my kids typically involves checking up on them or disciplining them.

If your scales are already weighted completely toward boundaries, you're going to need to work extra hard to reverse this trend. You may need to start a boundary fast. This means walking in a room and stifling the urge to ask your kids if they've finished their homework and chores . . . and just hanging out with them instead.

Again, boundaries are essential, but I'm addressing parents who are so focused on boundaries that they rarely bond with their kids. If that's you, try going 24 hours without giving instructions to your kids at all. If

the damage is really bad, you may need an entire week. Don't allow yourself to discipline, correct or advise in any way. Instead, look for opportunities to bond and just do life together.

Maybe you don't need a boundary fast. Maybe you feel like bonding is important, and you want to make sure you maximize these opportunities while you can. If so, look for moments of connection. Seek out settings where bonding happens. And if your kids never ask you to connect, that's all the more reason to seek out those bonding experiences. Take the initiative, and give your children a taste of your full attention. Then watch the way it strengthens the parent-child relationship that you have.

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Jonathan McKee has authored more than two dozen books including *Parenting Generation Screen* and *The Teen's Guide to Social Media & Mobile Devices*. He has 30 years of youth ministry experience and speaks to parents and leaders worldwide. As a member of Focus on the Family's Plugged In team, Jonathan is regularly featured on [The Plugged In Show](#) and our [Plugged In Entertainment Reviews](#). He and his wife, Lori, have three children and reside in Northern California. You can find helpful articles and videos of Jonathan on his website, [becomingscreenwise.com](#).



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