

Strengthen The Connection With Your Child Ideas to Cultivate The “We” Thinking

by Michele Ranard

I had to laugh at my sister the other day as she lamented the fact her husband was facebooking their teen son from the other room. What cracked me up was when she ranted “I mean, what happened to the phone and texting!?!”

Flesh-and-Blood Connections

Connectivity has exploded in recent years. Our children’s generation is more connected than any other, yet the fact remains they “still crave old-fashioned flesh-and-blood connections with their parents.” So writes clinician and author of *The We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids* (2009) Michael Ungar.

Ungar is concerned parents need reminding that children deeply desire to be noticed and held responsible. He writes “Beneath the whirling cacophony of the information revolution are children pleading for someone to notice them. They are looking for genuine connections with concerned adults.”

In order to help kids embrace “we” and transcend “me,” Ungar says the key is to offer opportunities for compassion and not through expensive toys, permissiveness, or overprotecting. Ungar says, “Give a child a chance to connect, and she will.”

Build Better Connections

The following tips to strengthen family bonds, cultivate compassion, and encourage “We Thinking” come from ideas weaved through *The We Generation* and personal and professional experience.

1. Prioritize Three. Set a rule about family meals: everybody at the dinner table at least three times a week. It may not be realistic to squeeze in three weeknight dinners, so expand your thinking to Saturday breakfasts, Sunday brunches, or Wednesday late night cookies and milk. Seen the science about the emotionally healthy benefits of eating together? It matters.

2. Really Notice. Ungar says “Our children want to be known to others. They want their parents to notice them. They want to be loved and caressed. And they want to be held responsible, for themselves and for others.” Frequently ask your child what they think they do well

and then have them demonstrate. For our son, it thrilled him to show us how far he could walk on his hands. Writing a word in cursive? Pouring juice into a glass? They love showing you what they’ve mastered and how strong they’ve grown.

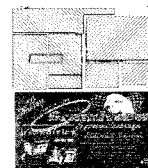
3. Take Vacation. Take as much family vacation as work allows. The opportunities for connection resulting from time away from the daily grind are GOLD and add up to memories for a lifetime. No one at

the end of their life wishes they had just spent less time with their kids on vacation.

4. Don’t Imagine They Don’t Need You. Don’t assume friends and interests are enough. Give them your time. So often we underestimate how much our kids – especially tweens and teens – want to be with us. It’s important to carve out family time as often as possible even if it feels their peers have passed you up on the influence scale.

5. Help Them Clarify Their Values and Identity. Just because they belong to the information age doesn’t mean it’s easier for your children to form an identity. Ungar reminds “Their connectivity through the internet a fine-hundred-channel-universe means they can pick and choose bits of their identity from around the world... They have, superficially, endless possibilities in a world that floods them with one identity choice after another.” They need your help sifting through the crap to get to the good stuff.

6. Try This High/Low Activity. This works especially well during meal-time conversation. It’s easy. Ask your child to iden-



tify their best and worst daily moments. Don't use this time to lecture if their 'low' happens to be failing an exam. Instead, open your heart and connect with the emotion they are expressing. Share their joy and sorrow. You may be surprised how much you learn about your kids' inner lives.

- 7. **Model Compassion.** Rally your children to help with a project. Whether helping an elderly neighbor with yard work, painting at church, volunteering at a nursing home, or bringing groceries to someone less fortunate, join forces. See how the fruits of your labors extend way beyond an afternoon of hard work. Ungar writes "I'm convinced their generation has the potential to become far more connected with others and more compassionate than the generation raising them was raised to be (that's us)."
- 8. **Write Notes.** Words are powerful and are sometimes easier expressed on paper. Fill the page with what you appreciate about your child, your wishes and hopes for them, and how they are full of potential and goodness. Leave the note on their pillow, and know it will touch them whether they mention it or not.

Connecting with your children not only strengthens family bonds but allows them to develop compassion, empathy, and a healthier "We" outlook.

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Resources: Ungar, Michael. The We Generation: Raising Socially Responsible Kids. De Capo, 2009.

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