

CONNECTIONS

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Blending Families Together: Stepparenting By Choice

Let your stepchildren know that you're invested in helping them feel safe and secure in both their homes.

By Dr. Ann-Louise Lockhart, Ph.D., **Gottman**

Being a parent brings so many joys and so many challenges. Parenting looks different for every person and family based on ethnicity, geographic region, and size. Being a stepparent can be even more challenging as the children move from one home environment to the next. It is important for every child to feel included in all their home environments. With so much uncertainty this year, having a safe place where kids can be fully loved is a true gift.

Here are some of the most significant messages that should be shared and felt by children who live in homes with stepparents:

We are linked together by choice

You decided to partner with another adult who happens to have children of their own from another relationship or marriage. You inherit these children by choice. When you



CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



Welcome to September's issue of the Connections newsletter. As we transition into autumn, we focus on nurturing our well-being and embracing the upcoming changes. Discover insights, resources, and support to help you navigate this season with clarity and resilience.

We started doing some outreach in August. This means that we have been visiting different departments within the City. During these visits, we have done tours to familiarize ourselves with the departments' facilities and to gain a better understanding of the work that is done. As part of these visits, we are available onsite for employees to learn about EAP services, ask questions, and receive some free EAP swag. If we haven't visited your department yet, you can expect a visit from us within the next 12 months. We look forward to meeting you all and touring your departments.

Exciting news...We are finally fully staffed and have an increased capacity to continue to support our employees and their family members (those that reside in your household)! Look out for a reintroduction of our team in our next newsletter! We are actively working on expanding the clinical services we offer internally to meet the demand and need of our employees. At EAP we can offer employees short term counseling services and we typically can see people within a week or two, depending on availability.

Inside you will find information on-

- Blending families together: stepparenting by choice
- Working out PTSD exercise is a vital part of treatment
- Building strong work relationships
- Back to school parenting
- 10 Questions to ask Kids beyond "How was school?"

Thank you for reading and being a part of Team City, let's make this season one of growth, positivity and most importantly, mental well-being. We are here if you need us- your mental health matters!

~ The EAP Team



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

decide to join with an individual who also has children, this comes with a unique responsibility and should be taken seriously. Ideally, you will have met, interacted with, and gotten to know the children in advance. However, if that didn't happen, take a step back and be intentional about developing that relationship with their children. Prioritizing your relationship with your partner's children sends a clear message of acceptance.

You are my child who happened to be born before we met

It is hard enough for children when they are unable to live together with both parents/caregivers under one roof. For many children, it can be a traumatic and heart-breaking adjustment coming to terms with having a different family. Some children may not be happy with their parent's new partner or spouse and may take it out directly on the stepparent. It is important not to take that personally since it is not about you. It is about them. Allow them to grieve. Give them space. Communicate acceptance, empathy, and validation. There is no need to rush the process. Provide stability and a sense of consistency to help them rebuild the family system they lost.

We don't give up on any child

If you had a rocky start with your stepchild, continue to be an emotionally and physically stable adult who plans on being in their life and their parent's life for the long-term. If you had a smooth start, then continue to build and nurture that relationship by remaining connected with the child, asking about their thoughts, dreams, and wishes. Ideally, co-parenting will make this process easier if it is possible to do so. When children see all parents/caregivers working together for their benefit, they feel safe and secure.

We continue to take steps together

This occurs through healthy and consistent communication with the co-parents, teachers, and children. What's even more important is to communicate directly to the co-parent and not through the child. If you disagree with something done by the biological parent, express your concerns in private with your partner and not in front of the child. Also, be honest about the child's behavior when they're with you and curb the temptation to try to make it sound as if there are no problems in your home. Try not to over-compensate or make excuses for the other household. If one home is strict, you might feel tempted to be lenient. This is an expected response, but not helpful. Communication is key and it is important both households meet in the middle.

Not being biologically related doesn't make you any less important

Have family meetings often and discuss openly what the kids and you (the stepparent) would like to be called. Brainstorm name ideas until you find one that feels right. No need to rush the process.

Finding a title and a name you all feel comfortable with matters. It creates a sense of identity, belonging, and even safety for all family members involved. You are not trying to replace their biological parent, but you are still an important figure in their life.

We will be supportive of our stepchildren without overstepping boundaries

Maintain a consistent weekly, monthly, and holiday schedule. Of course, plans will change, but developing a schedule created collaboratively helps instill a sense of security and predictability for the child.



When the children spend the week or weekend with you, try not to be the "fun house" in an attempt to be liked by the child. This can create tension between you and the biological parent since children may have a difficult time transitioning back.

Talk about discipline, privileges, and rewards across households to remain consistent, reduce confusion, and communicate a unified front. This helps reduce the likelihood the child will play parents and caregivers off one another as well. They will know all adults who are responsible for their care speak openly and will receive the same message regardless of which house they're in.

Stepfamilies can bring up a lot of emotions. Learn how to parent with emotion coaching in mind. Check out the online course, [Emotion Coaching: The Heart of Parenting](#), on sale now.

Linked references available in the original article.

FIRST RESPONDER FOCUS

‘Working out’ PTSD – exercise is a vital part of treatment

By Simon Rosenbaum, **The Conversation**

In 1954, the first director-general of the World Health Organisation, Dr Brock Chisholm, famously stated: “Without mental health there can be no true physical health.”

More than half a century later, we have large numbers of studies backing up his belief. Surprisingly, given the known effectiveness of exercise as an additional part of treatment for depression, there have been few studies investigating the use of exercise in the treatment of people with severe PTSD.

Post-traumatic stress disorder often occurs after potentially life-threatening events. PTSD is common in certain occupations, the armed forces and police officers. The US Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 10% of women and 4% of men are affected in the general population, with rates as high as 31% among combat veterans. In Australia, it is estimated up to 5% of people will experience PTSD, with a four-fold increase in PTSD cases since Australian troops first went to war in Afghanistan in 2001.

PTSD affects more than just mental health. It is linked with a greater risk of chronic conditions such as diabetes, obesity, alcohol abuse and cardiovascular disease. Gaining weight and losing fitness are also unlikely to help aid recovery from such a debilitating and all-encompassing illness, and can often make symptoms worse.

Exercise as Treatment

Because exercise can have a positive effect on depression, we suspected that exercise would have a similar effect on PTSD. So we conducted a clinical trial with 81 people, mostly former soldiers and police officers, in residential treatment at St John of God Hospital in Richmond, Australia.

In our study, we randomly assigned patients to two types of treatment. Half received usual care, a combination of group therapy, medication and psychotherapy. The other half received a structured, individualized exercise program combining walking and strength-based exercises in addition to usual care, for a period of 12-weeks.

The exercise program was low-cost and used elastic exercise bands to replicate traditional gym exercises such as bench press and squats. The exercises were tailored to each individual in order to maximize motivation and continue to take part.

Since poor motivation is a key symptom of severe depression, asking people who are experiencing severe mental distress to exercise can be difficult. For many of the participants in our study, their early exercise program simply involved getting up out of bed, walking to the nurses’ station twice and repeating.

In the following session, this could increase by adding an extra lap to the nurses’ station, in addition to various resistance-based exercises.

Program details were recorded in the participant’s exercise diary. Exercise goals were established and reviewed together with the exercise physiologist. We supplied pedometers (step-counters) allowing patients to keep track of their overall daily step count and set specific goals.

More Exercise, Better Health

Patients who received the exercise program in addition to usual care showed greater improvements in symptoms of PTSD, depression, anxiety and stress compared to those who received usual care alone. And the benefits of the exercise program extended well beyond improved mental health.

Patients who only received usual care gained weight, walked less and sat more over the 12-week period. Patients who completed the exercise intervention in addition to usual care, however, lost weight and reported significantly more time walking and less time sitting. Ultimately this reduced their overall risk of developing heart disease.

Similar results were found demonstrating a positive effect of the exercise program on sleep quality, known to be poor amongst people experiencing PTSD.

Exercise as Treatment

Importantly, as a result of this research St John of God hospital has now included exercise as a key part of its PTSD treatment program. Promising research from the UK has shown a positive effect of surfing on improving the well-being of combat veterans. Importantly, charities such as Soldier On in Australia, Help For Heroes and Surf Action in the UK are helping to promote physical activity and facilitate engagement among contemporary veterans.

Our findings are in line with previous research in the US demonstrating a positive effect of yoga for PTSD, and provides support for the inclusion of structured, individualized exercise as a part of PTSD treatment.

For the first time, this research shows that individualized and targeted exercise programs can improve the physical and mental health of PTSD patients. Further research is currently underway at the University of California, San Francisco.

While it is true that without mental health there can be no true physical health, exercise appears to be vital for both.

Linked references available in the original article.

LEADERSHIP *Matters*

Our external EAP provider FEI has some wonderful articles, webinars and a blog. Enjoy the following article that FEI has posted and shared with us.

INSIGHTS NEWSLETTER

Building Strong Work Relationships



By **Jill Hinrichs**, MSM, ICF Coach, Sr. Consultant and Strategy Lead

In today's fast-paced and diverse workplaces, building strong relationships is essential. The success of any team hinges on trust, respect, and effective communication. However, fostering these elements requires intentional effort and a strategic approach.

Here are three steps to cultivate a workplace culture where relationships thrive:

Step 1: Establish Values-Based Working Agreements

Encourage self-awareness within the team by discussing shared values and goals. Collaboratively establish working agreements that guide behavior and interactions. These agreements should reflect the organization's values while respecting diverse perspectives.

Example: A client hired a new leader who wanted to make an immediate impact. The leader's fast-paced approach caused tension in the team. AllOne Consulting helped the team create collective working agreements like "go slow to go fast." The leader agreed to slow down to ensure everyone was on board, leading to a more cohesive team.

Step 2: Foster Pro-Social Behavior

Integrate the working agreements into daily routines. Review them at every team meeting and hold each other accountable. Emphasize the importance of everyday interactions in building understanding, collaboration, and respect among team members.

Example: AllOne Consulting provided a client with teambuilding activities to use at the start of every meeting. One activity involved team members sharing one strength they see in their teammates, reinforcing pro-social behaviors and mutual appreciation.

Step 3: Proactively Address Tension

Equip team members with the skills to navigate challenging discussions effectively. Focus on finding common ground and steer conversations towards work-related topics. By proactively addressing tension, teams can resolve conflicts constructively and move forward.

Example: AllOne Consulting helped a team address a pattern of perceived unfairness. Team members candidly discussed the impact of breaking workstreams to help others. They agreed to maintain work boundaries, leveraging individual strengths and mitigating weaknesses. This open communication improved team dynamics during a tense period.

As a leader, your role is pivotal in fostering a workplace culture where diverse perspectives are respected and embraced. If you're seeking support in guiding your team, AllOne Health is here to help. Reach out to your EAP account manager for personalized support, including a discussion about how AllOne Consulting's experts can assist you.

AllOne Consulting offers tailored solutions such as **Team Cohesion & Effective Communication Retreats** and **Designing Teamwork Programs** to enhance team cohesion and collaboration. Invest in your team's success today and create a happier, healthier workplace.

Linked references available in the original article.



IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Back-to-School Parenting

By Claudia Skowron MS, LCPC, CADC, **Psychology Today**

This obvious, yet overlooked tip can make a huge difference as kids go back to school.

As summer approaches its end, the inevitable back-to-school grind is on the horizon. Often times, this is a stressful period for children and parents alike. Going from a less structured, easy going summer to a structured, routine oriented school schedule can be difficult to say the least. Typically, parents feel this before the kids do. They know the summer timeframe is ticking down, and perhaps remember struggles of past summer transitions of back to school. Tensions slowly rise, frustration tolerances decrease, and the pressure to get back on a routine schedule is at an all time high. There are many suggestions on how to ease the transition back to school, but perhaps one of the most important, yet most overlooked can make the biggest of differences.

Dear parents, please be mindful of “how” you talk to your kids about transitioning back-to-school. They say kids are like sponges, absorbing the feelings, language, attitudes, and values of those around them, particularly parents. Children can feel even the slightest edge of frustration from a parent. The goal is to create a positive association; and, hence, one of the best parenting tips for the back-to-school transition is to talk about going back to school with excitement!

In a recent discussion with a close friend, she shared with me how anxious and stressed she is about the inevitable back-to-school transition. Her child had struggled last year, and she was anticipating the same this year. Her tone changed, her body language changed, and her entire demeanor shifted. Her child was nearby, and although she was trying to conceal her feelings to the best of her ability, we could all feel her stress, including her child. But she is not alone in this feeling. In my clinical work, parents often begin expressing their worries in July. The subtle word usage, or an accidental expressed emotion is easily absorbed by the child. And realistically, this does not happen once, but many times in the weeks leading up to school. A child may already have their own anxiety, but the addition of parental worry only intensifies the reaction. There is the saying that a dysregulated parent cannot regulate an emotional child, and perhaps the same is true in this example.

So what can be done? First, parents absolutely need an outlet for their own worries, but this outlet should be away from a child. Second, and perhaps even more challenging, is to watch overgeneralizing and “future tripping.” Overgeneralizing is a cognitive distortion that leads one to believe that just because something happened once, or even several times, it will continue to happen the same way. “Future-tripping,” or sometimes referred to as anticipatory anxiety, has the individual worrying about something that will happen in the future that maybe isn’t relevant today or in this moment.

It is important to manage overgeneralizing and allow each new school year to be its own event instead of loading past experiences. Certainly, it can be helpful to assess what worked and what didn’t in previous years, but on the same token, it is important to not assume that the same will happen. We can’t necessarily stop anticipatory anxiety, but we can learn to manage it. Asking yourself, “is this a today worry” can be helpful. If there is nothing that can be done immediately today to alleviate the worry, we can teach ourselves to put that worry to the side and “pick it up again” when it’s more relevant. This further allows us to practice being more mindful and present focused. We are not negating our worries, but simply putting them to the side and “picking them back up” when they are more relevant.

In addition to watching the language and emotional tone that we use in back-to-school discussions, the following can also be helpful tips:

- 1. Start the sleep/wake cycle routine that mimics the school routine AT LEAST one week prior to school starting**
- 2. Praise positive back-to-school behavior, but also validate your child’s worries**



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

3. **Talk about the transition and what to expect**
4. **Allow your child choices (eg. school materials, first day outfit)**
5. **Be organized. Start school off with a clean bedroom, organize your backpack/folders/etc...**
6. **Instead of asking open ended questions such as “how was school today?” ask specific questions, eg. “What was one thing you learned today?” or “Which classmate did you talk most with today?”**

And finally, parents know that you are not alone. Back-to-school transitions are stressful and often we must allow room for the “transitory window.” After several weeks or the first month, most children do learn to transition to a “new normal” of being back in school. In the meantime, find yourself a healthy outlet and take care of your own emotions so you can help your child take care of theirs.

Linked references available in the original article.

10 Questions to Ask Kids Beyond “How Was School Today?”

By Amy Morin, **Psychology Today**

These questions can open the door for more meaningful dialogue with kids.

It’s tempting to ask your child, “How was school today?” to get some information on how things are going. But you’re likely to get back a monosyllabic response if you ask the same question day after day.

If you want to know more about what’s going on in your child’s day-to-day life, you’re not alone. With a little creativity and a few well-crafted questions, you can turn those vague answers into meaningful conversations.

As I explain in my book, *13 Things Mentally Strong Parents Don’t Do*, showing interest in your child’s opinions and ideas is important. And there are many things you can do to encourage them to open up and share their thoughts.

Here are 10 creative questions designed to encourage your child to share more about their day, along with tips for fostering a comfortable environment for open communication.



1. “What was the best part of your day?”

This question shifts focus from the usual routine and encourages your child to share their favorite highlight. This question is also helpful if your child tends to gravitate to the negative things going on. Talking about the positive aspects of school might help them see that there’s always something good going on in their day, even if that highlight involves lunch or recess only.

2. “Did anything surprise you today?”

Surprises can range from unexpected science experiments to getting picked second for the kickball team. This question invites your child to reflect on the day’s events and share fun details you might not otherwise hear.

3. “Who were you proud of today?”

This question can foster social skills as you ask your child to think of someone they were proud of. Whether they were excited a friend got a good grade in math or they were proud of a peer who dared to participate in a game at recess, this question can help them see how they can cheer others on, instead of thinking of everyone else as their competition.

4. “When did you feel proud of yourself today?”

In addition to pointing out why they feel proud of others, it’s also important for kids to celebrate their accomplishments. No matter how minor something might seem, taking a minute to acknowledge a time they were brave or a time when they were kind, can boost their confidence and reinforce good behavior.

5. “What’s one thing that would have made today even better?”

This invites your child to express any frustrations or challenges they might have faced, giving you insights into areas where

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

they might need support. It can also help them build problem-solving skills and identify things they want to change for tomorrow.

6. “What was the most interesting thing you learned?”

Encourage academic curiosity with open-ended questions that give them the freedom to share what interests them. Instead of asking about a specific subject or focusing on how they scored on a test, this question gives them the freedom to talk about their passions and it can foster a love for learning, regardless of how they perform on standardized tests.

7. “What did you play during recess?”

Recess is a key part of social and physical development. This question can lead to stories about friendship, teamwork, and play, revealing information about your child’s social skills. It’s good to know whether they spent their recess playing alone, talking to friends, or joining in a group activity.

8. “Who were you kind to today?”

This encourages empathy and altruism. It prompts your child to consider how their acts of kindness have the power to impact others. It can also show that you value being kind to others if that’s something you value within your family—as to only valuing their academic success in school.

9. “What’s something new you’d like to try at school?”

This question can lead to your child sharing things they’re curious to try, whether it’s a new club or a musical instrument. Sometimes children get caught up with their current activities and forget to look for new ones. This question might remind them that there are plenty of other things to explore and try if they want.

10. “What’s a mistake you learned from today?”

Kids need to know that mistakes aren’t something to be embarrassed about and it’s not a sign of their intelligence. Instead, mistakes can be great learning opportunities. The more you normalize mistakes and failures, the more likely your child will recognize how to take responsibility and learn from their missteps.

How to Create an Environment for Open Communication

To make the most of these questions, it’s crucial to create a space where your child feels comfortable sharing. Here are some tips:

- Listen actively. Show genuine interest by maintaining eye contact and responding positively to their stories.
- Choose your timing. Your child may not be eager to talk right when they get home. You might find it’s better to talk over dinner or after they’ve had some time to unwind.
- Ask limited questions. Don’t ask too many questions or your curiosity may feel like an interrogation. If your child doesn’t want to talk, move on to another subject to keep your conversations about school fun.
- Model how to share. Share your day, showing that it’s okay to talk about both highs and lows.
- Don’t immediately give advice. Resist the urge to tell your child what they should do if they say they experienced a problem. Instead, ask them what they plan to do to address the issue and help them problem-solve.
- Talk during activities. Staring face-to-face may put pressure on your child. They may be more likely to open up when they’re coloring or while you’re playing catch.

Your conversations don’t have to be long and in-depth about school. Keep in mind the goal isn’t to just gather information, but it’s also an opportunity to connect and show your child that you value hearing about their thoughts and feelings.

Linked references available in the original article.

*Thanks for reading,
we hope you found the information useful!*

**You can reach any of us by calling the
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