

Intentional Ways to Grow a Healthy Parenting Relationship

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0:07 ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I'm Annmarie McMahon with The Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University, and this is The ParentingMontana.org podcast. In this podcast, we'll be learning about intentional ways to grow a healthy parenting relationship.

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

A healthy parenting relationship is the foundation for everything. All learning starts in relationships.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, what does that mean? It means that as a parent or someone in a parenting role, we've got to plan. We can choose to be purposeful and deliberate in the ways we parent to create a foundation for our child's success. We can choose to be involved, to be consistent and predictable, provide opportunities, and engage in intentional communication. So today, I'd like to introduce you to our guest on our podcast. I have Dr. Shannon Wanless, an applied developmental psychologist and director for The Office of Child Development at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. So hi, Shannon, how are you?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Thank you for having me. It's good to be here.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Oh, good. I'll just say, you started your career as a Head Start teacher, and you spent the first year as a parent living in Taiwan as a Fulbright scholar. You have two kiddos, 11 and 13, and you make your home in Pittsburgh. Is that right?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

That's right.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Alright. Perfect. Well, today we're so excited to have you. We're going to talk about intentional ways to grow a healthy parenting relationship. So, just to start off, can you talk to us about why that's important?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

A healthy parenting relationship is the foundation for everything. In fact, you mentioned that I began parenting living in Taiwan, and I've done lots of work across cultures and around the world. And, I can say it is the most universal thing there is about parenting,

is that that relationship piece is so important for everyone. It's important for the parents and for their children. So, all learning starts in relationships, and your child is turning to you for learning. So, when they're very young and you make that strong relationship with them, they learn that adults and people in their lives can be trusted. And they learn what it's like to trust someone. And then, they really free up their mind to be able to learn and grow and engage together. So, you're really just teaching them what it looks like to connect with others, and then they'll be able to go out in the world and do it for the rest of their lives.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So what I'm hearing you say is that relationships... as parents, relationships are that foundational piece to everything -- our kids' wellbeing, their development, even in the future, their academic achievement. Is that right?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

That's right. It's important for them to be able to learn from you. So, if you're having a healthy relationship with your child, then it frees them up to be able to engage with you and learn with you. But, it also sets the stage for them learning from their teachers in the future, and other people, because they've practiced having that trusting relationship with you. So they'll be able to then apply it to other people for the rest of their lives.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, as my children grow up, I have to remind myself often that through the issues that we face, that relationship is a priority. So here's a question that I have. When I'm thinking about my kids, I have to stop and reflect that I need a relationship where I can tell my daughter, like if something's wrong, and then be able to sort of walk through what's going on. Or, I need a relationship to share our hopes and dreams. Or, for me to come to them with concerns, and for them to come back to me with questions, and it's not just respect but also love, and also just a relationship that can be lighthearted and fun. But, what I've often heard at times is that a parent shouldn't be your child's friend. So, is that different? And, what are your thoughts on that?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

It's absolutely different. So you're caring about your child, of course, maybe the way a good friend would. But your child is turning to you for some guidance and structure. Even if it doesn't sound like they're asking for that, that is really what they're looking for is a model or an example -- someone that they can trust to pave the way of what your family believes is the important way to be in this world. So, they're not turning to their friends for that; they're turning to their friends to have fun together, to experience relationships together. But, that friend could come and go, even if they think they'll never go. Friends could come and go.

Your parent is someone who's steady, predictable, there for you. Even in those moments when it doesn't feel like they want you around. You're still hovering around in the background, figuring out how to do some dirty dishes or fold the laundry three times

in a row just so you can be in that space and be available, even when you're not getting the most inviting signals from them. So, that's really different than what a friend would be doing for them.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, as a parent, it sounds like there's some... just some steps that we can look at. Like, how do we do this? How to have a healthy parenting relationship. So what's the first thing that you would say with how do we do this?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Well, I would say spending time with your child is really important, and it's good time with your child. So, that doesn't mean on your cell phone, even though I am guilty of that sometimes, as many of us are. It really means figuring out how to be present and how to be engaged in the things that will bring you and your child some connection and joy together. So, that could be doing household chores. It doesn't have to be fun all the time, but it's really being present and involved and connected with them. When they're little, they come after you often, looking for you to be involved. And you don't have to work that hard to be interacting with them. But, you have to work hard, I think, sometimes to be present in the things that are important to them.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, as my son's growing up, he's definitely more interested in hanging out with his friends and less and less opportunities for me to be involved with him. So, what does that look like for someone in a parenting role with a teen?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Well, I have to say, my children are getting there. So I've been noticing this and thinking about this a lot too. Right now, parents are home with their kids more than ever. I think the feeling that if your children are young, you need to be with them; you need to help them with their homework; you need to help manage their day; but then that feeling goes away as they get older, is really not true. In fact, they can manage some tasks on their own, but there's such an art to hovering in the background that I think I'm developing. I don't know if you feel this.

But it also takes more time to connect sometimes, because it's not always the right moment to connect. And so you do have to sort of gracefully be around and available and peeking in and checking in. But, if they're talking with friends over the internet, or if they're doing homework, or if they're frustrated at something that just happened at school, they may not be open and available. But you have to then circle back and circle back until it is the right time. You catch that present and engaged moment. It's a funny skill. It's a little bit stealth, I think.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

No, that's good. You mentioned too, just earlier about the idea of being consistent and predictable and... That makes a lot of sense, but I struggle here a bit too. So, for example, as a mom on one day, I can be really patient and respond to my daughter, and the next day, I just don't have the same level of patience for the same situation. I know that being predictable on how I respond has a really calming effect on her, but how do I handle when there's things going on in my life that interfere with my parenting and how I respond to her without always feeling like I've failed?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Well, actually, even though consistent and predictable are important, if you acted the same exact way every day, all the time, you'd be like a robot. So, none of us are exactly the same. So, when your stress levels go up and down and your busy-ness in your life and other things are happening, that's actually such a great moment to be honest and authentic with your child. Maybe it's something you feel like you can share with them, and maybe not. But you can always share, "Mom feels stressed right now. I feel really stressed. So even though it was okay to play the music loud yesterday, I'm just a little bit worked up, and I feel like it's not a good time for me. So today, I'd feel better if we just kept the volume down."

That isn't being inconsistent, because if you're always being authentic and acknowledging, "I feel different. The moment's different. I know I said something yesterday that's not today," is being human with them. Actually, they're going to feel different every day, and so it models for them what do they do when a friend wanted to do something yesterday that was okay, but it's really not okay for them right now because they have to study for a test. So, I think the consistency is authenticity and not flying off the handle and screaming about something, but just being honest.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Well, I think too, if they know that... If my daughter knows that I'm being honest, and she knows I'm going to have bad days sometimes, I think I could see where that could create just a level playing field, I think sometimes for us. So, another question I have is on the ParentingMontana.org tools and resources, I read where providing guidelines for your child can help them find their own way. I know that providing guidelines vary based on the age of my child, but what does that look like for our younger kids, like zero to four? So, what advice can you give parents of this age?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Well, when they're young, they really do eat up opportunities to explore their independence. Even one and a half - two, they're trying to figure out the world. And so, a chance to do something on their own they can really relish. But, you don't want them to do just anything. So, starting out with choices is always the best. Now, the problem I see people run into is they know which choice they want the child to pick, "So you can brush your teeth, or you can just go to bed." Well, you don't really feel that way. You know they need to brush their teeth before they go to bed.

So, the art of giving choices takes a little practice, but it's about being genuinely okay with either one that they're going to pick. So, you could have milk or water for dinner, either one is fine. Also, them feeling like they really can choose either one. So, when you feel that way inside -- that whatever you do within this set of guidelines is okay -- they will feel like you genuinely trust them and you're genuinely giving them some independence. And that sets the stage for when they're a teenager, and you need to be able to show them you genuinely trust them to stay out all the way until their curfew.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

The choices can be scary, though, for a parent. Because, what if I offered two choices, and they want something different? You can have water or milk, and what if they say, "But I want soda"? Then what?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

If it's really something that's not okay, then you need to say, "Nope. Soda's not okay." Especially as they get old enough to understand, you can say, "No, that's not one of the choices. It has too much sugar for me. I'm going to pick the other two. It's only okay to have water or milk." But, if they do pick something else that's okay, I think negotiating and being open to discussing, that is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of being reasonable and showing your child that you take their ideas seriously.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, it really is about empowering them by teaching them to make decisions, which I think is great, and finding the balance of guiding them, but not controlling them. That can be challenging for parents. Another thing that I think I struggle with is allowing them to make mistakes that I see are coming. Sometimes that can be tough... and still giving them the ability to make their own choices. Any thoughts on that?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Well, definitely something to think about is this mistake a big problem or a little problem? So, when they spill out all the blocks or all those tiny puzzle pieces all over the floor, that's going to be a disaster to pick up, and it's going to take a long time, and they're probably going to end up crying that they don't want to pick it up with you. But, it's not really the end of the world. If you have time to deal with it in that moment and the patience to work together to get it cleaned up and show that this wasn't easy, maybe it wasn't the best way to do it, but we got through it, then that's a lesson. That's a mistake you want to make, because they learn from it. And then they'll think about that in the future when they're getting out the puzzles. But, if it's something that's not safe or you know is really not okay, then those are definitely ones to stop before they happen.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, when you're building this healthy parenting relationship, it seems like communication and being able intentionally communicate is really important. What are

the steps or the tips that you can give us as parents to practice that intentional communication?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Well, I would say that listening is overlooked -- just how important that one is. Listening is really a big deal, and kids often... Young kids talk a lot sometimes, and so it's easy to kind of tune out all of that chatter in the background. But, they are dying to be taken seriously. They really want to be heard and taken seriously. So, when you are genuinely listening to them, they feel that you've built trust in your relationship. When you think about any adult relationship that you have, someone that listens to you and you really listen to, that someone that you know cares about you, that's someone you enjoy connecting with.

So part of listening is building in pauses when you're talking, so there is space for them to talk. So I often will hear parents at a playground or something ask so many questions in a row, looking for the child's answer. But then they don't wait long enough for the answer to come. So, I remember when I was a Head Start teacher years ago, with the infants and toddlers, we were taught to talk, say something, and then wait. And then offer an answer, if one's needed. And wait, and then respond again and wait. And they just kept emphasizing that wait time, so that it truly is a conversation, even if your child needs a minute to formulate their thoughts to jump in.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I read that lecturing and giving advice, or sort of that one way approach to communication don't really align with the idea of intentional communication. So, I have just a question. I remember watching my daughter play with a friend and have a disagreement, and I felt like I really wanted to step in and offer suggestions right there about ways she could have dealt with the situation differently. Am I not supposed to do that? Like, is that advice giving? Or what thoughts do you have there?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Well, it's a hard one. If you think about yourself, any of us, when we go to someone... So, when I come home at the end of the day from work and I say to my husband, "You won't believe what so-and-so did." If he jumps into advice mode, "It sounds like you jumped too quickly to invite someone else to the meeting, and that's why she's upset." I don't want to hear that. What I want to hear is him saying, "Oh, that sounds terrible." I think figuring out when you are in the, "I'm here to listen and connect and offer empathy and really hear your perspective," that is one mode versus, "I'm here to give you advice and teach you a skill" mode.

Any of us are not very good at learning when our emotions are high. So when you come home and you're so upset from something that happened at school, it's really not the moment to learn a new skill. So, that could be the moment to connect to say, "I hear you. That sounds terrible." And, then maybe you follow up after dinner or a little bit later

with a story or an idea or something that could be a little more advice-giving and guidance when the emotions have calmed down a bit.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, I think I'm hearing you say that just trying to understand the point of view, even in the moment, is important. And, that reminded me of a question I'm recently facing with my daughter is trying to understand her point of view at times. But sometimes her point of view is just so different than what I have, and that can really challenge me. This is a weird example, but in my house, we're having this issue right now about food. So, my daughter is 12, and so she's recently become more comfortable being a vegetarian and the rest of us aren't. And so, trying to understand her point of view, when it's not necessarily one that the rest of us share. Any advice on that? Just to try to keep that... I keep coming back, it's all about the relationship, but sometimes I don't get it or it's not how I would see things. So any thoughts there?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Well, my daughter's in a similar situation, so-

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Oh good. That makes me feel better.

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

But I think for many moments with children, no matter how old they are, you have an idea of what happened or if they're right or wrong in your head, even if you can't see the moment. So I'm thinking, because you mentioned food, of your child asking for you another cookie and you're saying to them, "Didn't you just have one after school?" But you can't remember if they had one. And they say, "No, I didn't have one." So in that moment, you have to decide. You're not sure. You think she just wants another cookie, but you don't really have any information that she's lying.

So there are a million moments I find in my parenting that are that where you don't really know, and you can side with your child and just assume. Unless you have factual information to the contrary, I'm going to always assume that my daughter has thought this through, that she's telling me the truth, and we're going to work on that assumption until I know otherwise. So, like being a vegetarian, I'm going to assume that she's really thought about this and this is what she wants to go with. And, I don't have to go with it myself. But, until I hear otherwise that it's not healthy or not working for her, I'm going to give her the benefit of the doubt that this is a good idea for her.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That can be difficult sometimes, but I hear what you're saying. So another, just looking at intentional parenting is this... I've heard a lot about safe, stable, and nurturing parenting relationships. So, can you just tell me more what that means and how that builds on sort of a lifetime of success with your relationship with your child?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Well, I think it's all summed up in the word trust. Can your child really trust you? So you just said safe, stable and nurturing relationships. We always think of physical safety, but it's emotional safety too. So, you feel like you are physically and emotionally safe when you are with people you can trust. So even when I'm doing something that feels scary to me, like rock climbing or something that I've never done before, if I am with a friend or my partner, who has done this many times and says, "I promise you, I've looked into this, I've checked the safety equipment, I know we're going to be okay," then I feel okay. Because I trust that person, and I have a history of trust with that person. So then I feel so much safer, even if this situation is making me nervous.

So that's what you're doing with your child every single day. You're building up. Even in these moments, like the first day of school, when they're not sure if they're safe or not. They've turned to you already a million times in their life and said, "Is it okay?" And, if it proves to be okay when you said it was, then they know this will be okay too -- that your voice is worth trusting. I think that stability is the same thing. It doesn't mean that you never go on a trip away from your child, or you never step away for nights with friends or family away from your child. It just means that you are consistent, and they know you will always come back. And, your word is always... is worth what you're saying, that it's always trustworthy. So, that kind of nurturing - this person loves me, and I know they will take care of me and tell me the truth - is priceless and sets such a strong foundation for your whole life together. How beautiful to feel that a person feels that way about you, as well.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So, knowing that no relationship is perfect, what advice would you give to a parent that feels their bond with their child is strained already, or maybe they don't have that strength to their relationship right now?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

I think it can always be repaired. It can always be repaired. If you think about it as a friend, or someone in your life that you feel like did something that upset you and lost your trust for a moment... Was there ever an example in your life of someone you were able to rebuild that connection with? It's not easy. If someone can't trust you, you're going to have to really do a lot of work to build that back. But, the work is constantly being honest and coming back and showing that your word can be trusted over and over and over again as often as needed until your child begins to believe that and have faith in your relationship again.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Just this depth of relationship with your child, I think can be scary for a parent. I didn't have this type of a relationship with my parents growing up. My parents were definitely more of authoritarian figure in my life. And we talked when we needed to talk about things, but there wasn't this warmth that I'm hearing you discuss. So how would you

give advice to a parent that maybe didn't feel as comfortable engaging in this level? I hear what you're saying is, this is how we all should treat each other as humans, and listen and be heard, and be warm and responsive. But, for a parent that didn't grow up that way, any thoughts there?

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

I actually think for many people, it's a shift from their family that they grew up in -- the parent that they hope to be. I don't want to minimize the work that goes into it, but I honestly think once you embrace it, being honest is easier. So, I think of times that my father just exploded yelling about something, and I don't want to be that explosion, yelling with my child. I think many times that was because he was afraid of what could happen or didn't know what to say. And, I find in those moments, I often say to my child, I am so, so mad that I don't even know what to say. I just need a little bit of time, and we can talk about it later.

So, it's not like I don't feel the anger, but I think when... It's really freeing to just be honest with them and just say, "I am so mad, I feel like I'm just going to scream, and that's not the way I want to parent. I need a little time in another room before we talk about it." That is genuinely what is happening inside me in that moment. I think some practice of being honest. After you scream, it's okay to come back later and say, "Honestly, I really shouldn't have screamed," or "I wish I hadn't," or "I'd like to talk now without screaming."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

It is all about building skills, though. Building skills in myself as a person and as a parent. And then in turn, helping my child have those skills as well. So, the key takeaway, I think, that I've heard from today is that parents can make a choice to be purposeful and deliberate in how we create a foundation for our child, and we can do that by being involved in consistent and predictable... provide opportunities and engage in intentional communication. I just thank you so much for being with us today and just being able to chat through some of the questions I know that parents here in Montana have. So, thank you so much for your time.

DR. SHANNON WANLESS:

Oh, thank you for inviting me. This was a joy.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

For more information on intentional ways to grow a healthy parenting relationship, you can check out the how-to video of the same name in the media section of ParentingMontana.org, and additional information in the, I Want to Know More section of the website. So, thanks for joining us today. Keep checking back for additional podcasts, tools, and resources being added to ParentingMontana.org.

29:03 VOICEOVER:

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Thanks for listening to The ParentingMontana.org podcast.

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