

# MAKING CONNECTIONS



Lauren H. Kerstein LCSW, P.C. 303.284.3603 [www.LaurenKerstein.com](http://www.LaurenKerstein.com) August 2011



## **“Mommy, I Don’t Like the Dark!”**

### **Strategies for Anxiety in Your Young Child**

*By Lauren H. Kerstein, LCSW*

For those of us who have young children, we know the joy of getting a sweet, slobbery kiss or watching our child figure something out for the first time. We also know the sorrow of watching our child struggle with nighttime fears or scream in response to thunder. Although fears are developmentally appropriate at many different ages and stages, fears can also be debilitating and horribly stressful for all involved. The following tips are designed to assist young children with coping with fears and anxieties.

- Read children’s books to explore emotions. Most children’s books have wonderful pictures that depict a whole range of emotions. It can be very helpful to read the books with your child and point out the feelings you see. Use language that is appropriate for your child’s development. Depending upon your child’s abilities, you can also talk about what caused the feeling to happen and what the character did in order to “deal” with the feeling(s).
- It can be helpful to “throw” away scary things. You can sit with your child and let him/her talk about things that are scary. You can draw a rough sketch of the thing that scares your child. You can then sing a little song, “I’m not going to let you make me



## **Inside This Issue**

“Mommy, I Don’t Like the Dark”	1-2
Lauren’s Reflections	3
Five Simple Ways to Connect with Your Child for the Rest of The Summer	4
Twelve Practical Sensory Strategies	5
August Has Arrived—Simple Tips for Back to School Survival	5
Having a Hard Time Being Heard?	6
Sibling Stories	7
“Making Connections”	8
Who We Are	9
Contact Information	10

scared or sad anymore”. While you sing the song, you can rip up the picture you drew as a team and throw it in the trash. This can be a very powerful activity for a young child.

- The concept of calm can be quite foreign to young children. You can take pictures of your child looking calm and engaging in strategies such as taking deep breaths, cuddling on pillows, smiling, and getting a hug to name a few. You can then create a “calm” book out of the pictures and read the book with your child over and over. This might assist your child with (a) developing a better understanding of what calm means and (b) providing a concrete, visual strategy to use in difficult times.
- One of the greatest assets we have as adults is the ability to catch feelings before they become too big. This is an important skill to teach young children. You can buy a net (some

**“Mommy, I Don’t Like the Dark!”****Strategies for Anxiety in Your Young Child***Continued from page 1*

children’s stores have small nets that can be used to catch insects). You can then talk about catching the icky or scary feelings in the net to make them go away. This can help young children feel some power and control over their overwhelming feelings.

- It can be helpful to use a dream catcher. You can either buy a dream catcher or draw one together. It is often quite comforting for children to believe the dream catcher is “watching over” their dreams and will catch the scary ones.
- Sometimes taking fears outside of children and giving them power over them can be very useful. Bubbles are a wonderful way to do this. You can pretend the bubbles are worry bubbles and blow them into the air. You and your child can then pop the bubbles to make the worries go away.
- Providing a child with a “lovey” or other object can be helpful. The “lovey” can help the child feel secure.
- For some children, it is helpful to teach them the concept of a “worry bug”. You can teach “fly swatter” strategies to get the worry bug to go away. These strategies could be taking a deep breath, getting a hug, or playing on the swings.

It is very difficult to console a child when he or she is experiencing anxiety. It is also distressing. If we can give children words to use for feelings, insight into triggers and provide strategies that can be helpful, we have at least begun to plant important seeds for future management of anxiety.

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*What I am looking for is not out there; it is in me.*  
*Helen Keller*

**Lauren's Reflections**

It is already late July. Didn't the summer just begin? I continuously marvel at how fast time flies. The days are so long and yet the weeks, months and years fly by. My presentation and consultations in Alaska came and went. What a gift to be able to meet so many wonderful people and share a piece of their lives for a short period of time. My presentation and consultations in Granby came and went. I had the opportunity to enjoy a magnificent drive (I even made it up with no snow, which was a feat this Spring in Colorado). I once again, had the honor of meeting some amazing people. My presentation for the Douglas County School District came and went. I was truly enriched by the questions and conversations we had. I made it through the ridiculous heat and humidity in Orlando, Florida presenting at the Autism Society of America (ASA) Conference and then adding a family trip to Disney World. It is always so humbling for me to be amongst so many incredible practitioners and families at the ASA conference. Disney World is, well, magical! Despite what felt like 150 degree weather and some drama from my 4 and 8 year old daughters, it was a fantastic trip!

So, as we approach August, and anticipate the new school year, it makes me think about the opportunities we have as parents each summer. We have the opportunity to be driven crazy by our needy, demanding, bored children. We have the opportunity to think of new creative ways to establish order—create structure, enforce rules and facilitate the dreaded consequences for the millions of times our children step over the imaginary yet seemingly invisible line we draw in the sand. We have the tantrums and the meltdowns and the yelling matches. But...we also have the opportunity to watch and marvel as our children enjoy an interest they have or discover new fun forts they can make with blankets and pillows. We have the quiet moments when for just a second we feel full of love and life feels good. We have the stolen glances when we peek at our sleeping children and marvel at how adorable they are when they are sleeping. We have the privilege of watching our children grow and learn. We have the moments when our children offer to help with a task around the house or lend a hand when we are struggling to carry in the groceries. We have the chance to practice connecting with our children.

If any of us knew the journey we face as parents, I wonder if we would have taken the leap. But, I truly believe that for all of the struggles, and all of the trying moments—parenthood is enriching in ways that aren't quantifiable. We have the gift (particularly throughout the long summer days) to watch the ways in which our children view the world, interact with the world and experience the wonders the world has to offer. This is a window into something bigger than ourselves. This is what keeps us going and nurtures a love so great that it is consuming, scary and awesome all at the same time.

I challenge you to find the things in your child you love.

I challenge you to find quiet moments to enjoy the strengths your child has rather than focus on the flaws.

I challenge you to find peaceful moments for yourself this summer so that you can fill up your gas tank and can move forward.

I challenge you to give yourself permission to make mistakes.

I challenge you to give yourself time and support to learn from your mistakes.

I challenge you to breathe—deeply and calmly—so that you can continue to put one foot in front of the other for tomorrow and the days ahead.

I challenge you to find moments of joy and wonder as you finish summer “break” and begin the school year.

*Lauren*

### Five Simple Ways to Connect with your Child for the Rest of the Summer

*Melyssa Mayer, LSW*

Close your eyes. Imagine what your typical daily schedule looks like. How do you feel? Overwhelmed, inundated, swamped. If these feelings are crossing your mind you are not alone. With heavy workloads and the need to support children emotionally and financially it can be extremely difficult to find ways to pay attention to your children. Paying attention to your children is the way you connect, create memories, encourage growth and bond with them.

Summer time is one of the most stressful times for parents. The consistency of school is no longer there for you. You need to not only schedule activities for your children, but also find time for your busy work schedules. This work might include jobs outside of the home, and/or the never ending housework that needs to be completed. Sadly, most jobs do not take a summer hiatus like the school system and housework certainly doesn't disappear over the summer. Therefore, connecting with your child can be even more demanding and challenging over the summer months. Connecting does not merely mean taking one day a month with one child and spending the entire day playing, answering all of their questions and creating special memories. Granted this time with your child is extremely important, it is also important to bond and create memories with your child daily. Establishing a solid connection with your child can take a small amount of time in the big picture of one day.

Dr. John Gottman (1999) has done years of research into what makes marriages healthy. His research on the "seven principles for making marriage work" apply equally well to establishing a meaningful parent/child relationship. If you can find time to follow these principles every day, amazing results will follow. The results will show the following...

- Happier, more secure children and teens
- Children and teens more willing to discuss their problems and apply your advice
- Ability to enjoy your children more
- Increased number of smiles and hugs

Ready or not, here are the five things you can do to connect with your children this summer and into the school year.

1. **Separation** – Do not leave in the morning, drop them off, or put them on the bus until you know one interesting thing coming up in your child's or teen's day. By asking your child about their upcoming day you are showing that you care about what they are going to experience. By asking about an interesting part of your child's upcoming day you are prompting them for the next principle on our ways to connecting with your child.

2. **Reunion** – Take 10 minutes a day (per child) to talk about their day. Your child is more apt to discuss with you difficulties and accomplishments if you ask.

### 3. Admiration and Appreciation/Adding to their

**Emotional Bank Account** – Find some way to genuinely communicate affection and appreciation to your children or teen every day. We all have what I like to call an emotional bank account. Friends deposit and withdraw from your child's emotional bank account on a daily basis. Children's self esteem and self confidence come from you as well. If you can promote the ideals of self worth to your child and add to their emotional bank account on a daily basis, they will never go bankrupt and they will feel a stronger connection to you.

4. **Affection** – Kiss, hug, hold, tickle, or play with your child every day, always include a good night kiss, an "I love you", and resolve any anger before sending your child or teen to bed.

5. **Family Time** – Set aside two hours of uninterrupted family time each week; this can be a family meeting, game night, hike, playing outside, going to a park, etc but it CAN NOT include video games, movies, TV or phone calls (these dramatically reduce interaction, which is the opposite of your goal). Phone calls can be used when you are on a trip or out of town.

Now I bet you are wondering, "this all sounds wonderful, but how do I fit these into my day?" Separations can easily be done in the car or at the breakfast table. Reunions can be done while driving home or around the dinner table. Having your children share the two best moments and one worst moment of the day at dinner every evening can fulfill two of our principles. This is also a great time to admire and appreciate your kids for managing bad things well or accomplishing something positive. There is a bonus for family dinner time, too! Research has been conducted to determine what National Merit Scholars (the most academically successful students in our country) have in common. National Merit Scholars come from varying races, socioeconomic classes, regions, and schools. The only common thread found, and it was found with every National Merit Scholar, was a daily, uninterrupted family dinner hour that was full of conversation (Levy, 1996).

These actions take a minimal amount of time per day to complete. Try to use them in your day this summer and see what results you see with your family.

Levy, S. (1996). "Stalking the Amphisbaena"; *The Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 23, No. 3), pp. 163-176.

Gottman, J. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Crown Publishing Group.

~ Stress is not what happens to us. It's our response TO what happens. And RESPONSE is something we can choose ~  
*Maureen Killoran*



### **Twelve Practical Sensory Strategies**

By Lauren Kerstein

For children who are struggling with sensory challenges, it is critical that we put a “sensory diet” in place which includes lots of moments for input. A “sensory diet” isn’t about Atkins or Weight Watchers but rather about adding activities throughout the day that can support a child’s sensory system and ability to regulate his/her body. Patricia Wilbarger, M.Ed, OTR, FAOTA coined this term. We put things in place all of the time throughout our day to regulate our bodies without second thought. We drink coffee, sip from bottles of water, chew gum, suck on mints, eat, eat some more, stretch and make extra trips to the bathroom. These are all ways in which we regulate our bodies. Our children need these strategies as well, but need a bit of assistance to implement them.

1. Have mints and gum with you. These can provide input as well as assist a person who is sensitive to smells.
2. Put a hand towel in the bath or shower instead of a wash cloth. A wet hand towel can be heavy and provide proprioceptive input.
3. Have your child help transfer the wet laundry from the washing machine to the dryer. Again, wet laundry is a nice, natural way to get input.
4. Assign your child the task of removing the jug of milk or juice from the refrigerator each morning. This can provide some “heavy work” in a quick, easy way.
5. Give your younger children access to sand and buckets they can fill and lift.
6. Provide access to play doh.
7. Take family walks each day for about 10 minutes or so.
8. Drop everything and do wall push-ups 1-2 times per day. Make it fun and do it together.
9. Have your child help you water the outside plants. Heavy watering cans provide wonderful input.
10. Give lots and lots of hugs if your child likes them or have a cool high five “hug” you do throughout the day.
11. Create a box of “fidgets” and keep it in a prominent location in your house. Your child can play with those fidgets to get input.
12. Provide crunchy or chewy snacks. Input into our jaw can be very powerful.

Kerstein, L. (2008). *My sensory book: Working together to explore sensory issues and the big feelings they can cause: A workbook for parents, professionals, and children.* Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Wilbarger, P., & Wilbarger, J.L. (1991). *Sensory defensiveness in children aged 2-12.* Santa Barbara, CA: Avanti Educational Programs.

### **August Has Arrived—Simple Tips for Back to School Survival**

By Lauren Kerstein

Going back to school means: structure, predictable schedules and alone time. It also means homework and dread that our phones will ring with trouble. Here are a few simple tips to try to start the school year well.

1. Make a weekly schedule with your child. Write out the items your child might need for each day. Include after school activities and childcare. Use a dry erase board and talk with your child about how things on the schedule might change. Update and revise the schedule routinely each Sunday.
2. If your child has extra needs, it is always helpful to schedule a meeting with your child’s team before the beginning of school or within the first couple of weeks.
3. Talk with your child about the “Hidden Curriculum” (Myles, 2004 ). The “Hidden Curriculum” describes the rules that your child might encounter in the different classrooms and settings throughout his/her school day.
4. Put some sensory strategies in place in prevention not response to challenges. These might include (but are not limited to) gum, mints, a water bottle, and “break cards” so that your child can leave the room if need be.
5. Prevention! Ask your child’s team to put strategies in place from the beginning—visual supports, graphic organizers, explicit class rules and other accommodations that might help your child. Prevention is far better than responding to challenges after they have occurred.
6. Ask your child’s teacher(s) to talk with the teacher(s) from last year to find out what strategies were helpful, what strengths your child has and what needs need to be met.

Remember, your child is lucky to have you advocating and supporting him/her!!

Myles, B. (2004). *Hidden curriculum: Practical solutions for understanding unstated rules in social situations.* Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

## Having a Hard Time Being Heard??

By Amy Topelson MA, MA, NCC  
Couple and Family Therapist

The number one complaint I hear from couples is "We just don't communicate well with each other." Does this sound familiar? In many cases the couple is right. Effective communication is not something they teach you in school but it is something that can be learned and practiced in couple or family counseling. One of the most effective communication tools that I have learned as a couple and family therapist is called "Non-Violent Communication" or NVC for short. NVC was developed by Marshall Rosenberg, PhD: You can read more about Rosenberg and NVC at his website:

[www.nonviolentcommunication.com/](http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com/)

I like NVC because it gives you a simple four step process to sharing your thoughts, feelings and needs without putting the other person down or blaming them. Research has shown that couples who communicate effectively and get their needs met by their significant other are more likely to stay together than couples who don't.

**Old Way: Jane:** "You never ask me what I want. We always have to do it your way!"

**Bob:** "You never tell me what you want. What do you think; I am a "mind-reader?"

Here is **NVC in a Nutshell:** Use "I" Statements for each step when possible.

**Step 1:** State the Facts of Situation using "I" Statements: Examples: "I remember when"..., "I noticed that you"..., "I saw you"..., "I heard you say"....etc.

**Step 2:** State Your Feelings About the Situation: Examples: "I felt angry when you...", "I felt scared when...", "I feel loved when...", "I am sad that..." Etc.

**Step 3:** State What You Need: Examples: "I need to feel appreciated," "I need to feel safe," "I need to know that you care about me..." Etc.

**Step 4:** Make A Request: "Next time can you...", "Would you please...", "Can you...", Etc.

### NVC Way:

**Jane:** "I remember the last 5 times you picked the movie and I didn't like most of them. I felt invisible because it seemed like you paid more attention to the movies than you did me and you didn't notice that I was upset because I didn't say anything. I need to feel included in decisions we make and have a voice in our relationship. Can we make more decisions together in the future so that I feel included?"

(Bob responds after doing Active/Reflective Listening\*)

**Bob:** "Sure, I think we can do that. I would like to hear what you have to say and know your thoughts and feelings about things. It would take the burden off of having to guess what it is you want."

What I tell couples is that conflict is normal in any relationship. It's not the amount of conflict a couple has that determines relationship success or failure, it is how conflict is handled. Communication is key to any loving and healthy relationship be it with our spouse, partner and children as well as other social relationships we have. What needs to accompany NVC is learning how to be an "Active Listener" who can reflect back what they hear. \*Active and Reflective Listening is a key component to having effective communication. For example, "Jane" (from example above) can do an amazing job expressing her thoughts, feelings and needs but it won't make a difference unless "Bob" is really listening and hearing what she has to say. I will write more about being the Active/Reflective Listener in the next newsletter, so stay tuned!

If you are interested in learning more about NVC and Active/Reflective Listening please call me at 303-717-4929 or email me with your questions at [amyttopelson@atfamilytherapy.com](mailto:amyttopelson@atfamilytherapy.com). You can read more about Amy Topelson by visiting her website at [www.atfamilytherapy.com](http://www.atfamilytherapy.com).

# SIBLING STORIES

## A VIEW FROM THEIR EYES

### FEELINGS

- *Ambivalence*  
“I love my sibling but I want him to be different.”
- *Love*  
“I do love my sibling.”
- *Embarrassment*  
“My sibling had to be dragged into school screaming the other day and all of my friends heard him. They knew he was my brother.”
- *Isolation*  
“My friends don’t understand what my life is like.”
- *Guilt*  
“I feel bad that I don’t always want to spend time with my sibling.”
- *Worry*  
“I worry that my sibling isn’t going to do well in his new school.”  
“I worry that I can catch autism.”
- *Jealousy*  
“My sibling gets more attention than me.”
- *Happy*  
“I had fun watching a movie with my sibling today.”

(Lauren H. Kerstein, LCSW, P.C., 2010)

### “SIBLING SUPPER CLUBS”

This group will meet 5:15 pm -7:15 pm on **The Third Thursday of Every Month** for dinner and dessert. The group members will have the opportunity to begin to create a group project recording, illustrating and discussing the ups and downs of having a sibling with unique needs. The group will also include games and an opportunity to have FUN!



### MAKING CONNECTIONS - RELATIONSHIP SKILLS GROUPS

“Making Connections” began in 1999 to create an opportunity for individuals struggling with relationship skills to come together to find friends. The groups are designed to work on the numerous skills involved in interacting with others, creating friendships and sustaining fulfilling satisfying relationships. Most importantly, “Making Connections” was designed to make interactions meaningful and fun!

The groups incorporate the following skills into fun activities:

- Interaction and friendship skills
- Reading nonverbal cues
- Recognizing one’s areas of challenge
- Understanding one’s strengths and the ways in which to build upon those strengths
- Sensory awareness and strategies
- Cooperation
- Executive Function
- Big picture thinking vs focusing on the small details (Central Theory of Cohesion)
- Bullying
- Effective problem solving

For more information, to fill out intake forms, or to confirm your child will be continuing groups, please visit our website at: [www.LaurenKerstein.com](http://www.LaurenKerstein.com) or call 303.284.3603.

#### The “Making Connections” Relationship Skills Group Schedule—September 2011 through December 2011

Week of	9/12	9/19	10/3	10/10	10/17	11/7	11/14	12/5
Early Elementary Monday 1 hour long 4:00-5:00	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	HOLIDAY PARTY
Late Elementary Monday 1 hour long 5:15-6:15	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	HOLIDAY PARTY
Middle School Wednesday 1 hour long 4:00-5:00	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	HOLIDAY PARTY
High School Wednesday 1 hour long 5:15-6:15	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	HOLIDAY PARTY

**PLEASE CALL IMMEDIATELY TO ENROLL YOUR CHILD OR CONFIRM YOUR CHILD WILL BE CONTINUING FROM THE SUMMER GROUPS (303) 284.3603.**



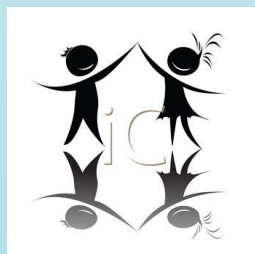
**THE PROFESSIONALS WITH:  
Lauren H. Kerstein LCSW, P.C.**

**Lauren H. Kerstein, LCSW:** *Lauren Kerstein, LCSW* is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who specializes in working with children, adolescents, adults and families. After receiving Bachelors of Arts in both Education and Psychology at Washington University in St. Louis, Lauren attended George Warren Brown School of Social Work and received a Masters in Social Work. Lauren completed a post-masters fellowship at JFK Partners, the University Affiliated Program at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center where she received multi-disciplinary training from psychologists, psychiatrists, occupational therapists, speech/language pathologists, developmental pediatricians, neuropsychologists, and social workers at JFK Partners. Lauren specializes in working with children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders and particularly Asperger's syndrome. She also works with children experiencing anxiety, depression, relationship skill difficulties, divorce and other adjustments, developmental or mental health needs. Lauren is the author of *My Sensory Book: Working Together to Explore Sensory Issues and the Big Feelings They Can Cause: A Workbook for Parents, Professionals, and Children (AAPC)*, and a textbook entitled *Asperger's Syndrome-- Diagnosis, Treatment Issues and Intervention Options* which is available as an on-line course through Western Schools Publishing.

**Mara Trager, LPC:** *Mara Trager, LPC, NCC* is a psychotherapist who specializes in the relationship skill development of children ages 2-18. She holds a B.A. in Art History and an M.A. in Counseling Psychology. Mara provides in-home therapy for families and children through Colorado's Early Intervention Program. In her private practice, she offers individual, family and group therapy. She is particularly passionate about the group process in which her clients can problem-solve, practice social interaction and develop friendships. Mara is also a child yoga instructor and loves to teach children cooking and art.

**Melyssa Mayer, LSW:** *Melyssa Mayer, LSW* is a Licensed Social Worker who holds a B.A. in Psychology and Sociology, and a Masters in Social Work. In her private practice, Melyssa specializes in working with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders, relationship skill development, mental health issues and school consultations. Melyssa also provides home-based therapy through Colorado's Early Intervention Program. Melyssa builds upon the strengths of the individuals with whom she works in order to create a successful intervention plan.

**Kelly Chavanu, BA:** *Kelly Chavanu* has a B.A. in Human Services. She has a teaching certificate and is nearing completion of a Master's program in Special Education. Kelly specializes in Autism Spectrum Disorders, behavioral issues and relationship skill development. Kelly provides in-home consultation through Colorado's Early Intervention Program as well as assistance around behavioral issues.



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- Training/Presentations



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