

Ep. #291: Why Some of Your Kid's Friendships Stick—and Others Fall Apart



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host
Lisa Smith

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Welcome to Real World Peaceful Parenting, a podcast for parents that are tired of yelling, threatening, and punishing their kids. Join mom and master certified parent coach, Lisa Smith, as she gives you actionable step-by-step strategies that'll help you transform your household from chaos to cooperation.

Let's dive in.

Welcome, welcome, welcome Welcome to today's episode. I am so jazzed to be with you today because today we're talking about something that I think about a lot, something that touches every relationship in your life, your friendships, your marriage, your partnership, your relationship with your kids, and your relationship with yourself.

Something that, if I'm being really honest, I had to learn the hard way. We're talking about connection, and today I wanna talk specifically about how to actually build it, because not all connection is created equal, and some of the ways we bond with people are a lot more fragile than they feel in the moment.

And I wanna share a framework with you today that I call the connection ladder. And by the time we're done, I think you're going to see your own relationships and your kids' relationships in a completely different way. Now, I wanna start by encouraging you to picture a scene. Maybe it's the school pickup line, maybe it's a group text, maybe it's a girls' night out or a neighborhood gathering, and the conversation turns, as it so often does, to someone who isn't in the room.

You know, it sounds something like, "Can you believe what she said?" "Did you hear what happened with blah, blah, blah?" "I don't wanna gossip, but..." And something happens in that moment. There's a warmth, a sense of closeness, a we're-in-this-together feeling that is genuinely satisfying. It feels like connection just happened.

But there's often something else, too. Maybe later that night or even a few minutes after, a little itch, a subtle discomfort you can't quite name. Yeah? That chemistry you felt, it's real. The closeness was real in the moment, but what you were bonding over, the rung of the ladder that you were standing on matters more than most of us realize.

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And our kids, they're watching which rungs we climb. Now, let me start at the bottom of the ladder because it's where a lot of us spend more time than we'd like to admit. The lowest form of connection is bonding over negativity, a common enemy, shared complaints, gossip, someone who isn't in the room. And here's why it feels so good in the moment.

It's fast. It creates an instant sense of us and it taps into something primal, the tribal brain that says, "I know who's in my group and I know who's not." So it registers in the body as closeness and as a belonging. And here's the other piece, the one that doesn't get talked about enough. Gossip requires zero vulnerability from you.

When you're focused on someone else- You're not sharing anything real about yourself. You're not risking being seen or judged or known. You don't have to show up. You don't have to be real. You just have to agree. That's what makes it so frictionless, and that's why it's so easy. And that's why it's so easy to reach for in a moment when actual connection feels harder.

But here's the problem. Any connection built on tearing something or someone down is only as strong as the thing you're tearing down. The moment that person, that situation, that shared complaint is gone, so is the glue. And there's something else. The same person you bond with over gossip about someone else, they can just as easily turn around and gossip about you because that's the culture you've built together.

I know this personally. I grew up in a family where gossip was the culture. That's just what you did. You sat around the table and talked about other people, who was doing what, what so-and-so said, what was wrong with this person or that one. And I absorbed it without even really thinking about it. I guess growing up, if I'm honest, I thought that's what connection looked like.

That's how you bonded. That's what it meant to be close. And then at some point, I started noticing how I felt after those conversations. That itch I mentioned, that subtle ick. Something about it didn't sit right with me anymore. I didn't feel good, and I really noticed that I didn't feel closer to anyone, not really.

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I felt a little hollow. So I made a decision. I decided that I was gonna stop bonding with people that way. I was going to find other ways, better ways to build connection, and that choice changed the quality of every relationship in my life. I've said this many times before. Kids don't do what we say, they do what we do.

So before we talk about how our kids are connecting with their friends, it's worth us all taking an honest look at which rungs we're standing on ourselves. So let's climb the ladder together because gossiping is at the bottom rung, and there are about six more above it, each one building something stronger and more lasting than the one below.

The second rung is bonding over proximity. We sit near each other. We're in the same class. We're in the same neighborhood. We're in the same office or the same department within a company. This is real connection. Don't dismiss it, but understand that it's circumstantial. Oftentimes, the moment the proximity goes away, the bond often goes with it.

This is the friend you talk to every day at work and then never spoke to again after one of you changed jobs, not because either of you was a bad friend, just because the glue was the location, not something deeper. Make sense? Okay. The third rung is bonding over sameness. We're the same kind of person.

We're in the same group, or we have the same background. There's a real sense of we here, a sense of identity, but it's still somewhat surface level. It's about matching, not knowing. The fourth rung on the ladder is bonding over shared interest. You both genuinely love the same thing. Um, if you're like me, right now it's Mahjong, or Rummikub, or a sport, or a hobby, or a genre of music, or a regular occurring TV show, or a cause.

This is where the ladder starts to feel meaningfully different, because the connection is built on something you're both drawn towards, something positive, something that exists outside of who else is in the room or what they're doing wrong. Shared interest holds up over time. The fifth rung is one of the most powerful, bonding over a shared experience, which is something like doing something new together, or going somewhere together, or going through the same hard thing together side by side.

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This is where real closeness gets forged fast, and it's why, and I want you to hear this one, it's why your kid could go to summer camp for eight days and come home with a best friend they would walk through fire with. It's why kids who play on a team together, or sing in a choir together, or put on a play together, or march in a band together, those bonds go deep, and they often last.

Because shared experience says, "We're in this together. We both showed up, we made something happen, and now we have memories, and the memories don't go away." Big fan of bonding over the fifth rung. The sixth rung is bonding over a shared goal, building or working towards something together. A team with a season to win, a cast with an opening night to hit, a group with a project to finish.

Trust gets built in the doing, in the showing up, in the figuring it out together under pressure. And at the very top of the ladder, the deepest, most lasting form of connection there is, is being truly known. Vulnerability, real feelings. The friend who sees the worst of you and stays. The relationship where you don't have to perform or manage or be okay all the time.

Where you can say the hard thing and not lose the connection. This is what turns a good friend into a lifelong one. This is what we're all longing for, and what our kids are longing for, too. Now, here's the thing I want you to sit with today. Every rung above gossip is built on building something, not tearing something down.

And the higher you go on the ladder, the more the connection requires something of you. Showing up, being present, risking something, being real. Gossip requires nothing. That's part of why it's so easy to reach for. You don't have to be vulnerable. You don't have to show up consistently. You don't have to risk anything except someone else's reputation.

But the top rungs, well, they cost you something. Shared experience means you have to actually do things together. Shared goals means you have to commit. Being truly known means you have to let someone see you. But what you get back is proportional to what you put in, and what your kids get back is proportional to what they learn to put in.

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Now, here's the part that matters for us parents, because remember, this is a parenting podcast. Our kids are not just building connections out in the world with their friends. They're learning how connection works by watching us. The way we talk about our neighbors, the way we talk about our extended family, the way we talk about people from school, the way we talk about family members when they're not in the room, the way we deepen friendships or don't.

All of it is a lesson, and I promise you, your kids are taking notes. This is why I wanna encourage you wherever and whenever you can to put your kids in environments where the higher rungs happen naturally. Sports team, drama productions, choirs, summer camps, marching band, robotics, investing club, hiking regularly, any group activity where they are working towards something together, experiencing something together, building something together.

Those environments are connection accelerators. They put kids on rungs five and six almost automatically, and the friendships that come out of them tend to be ones that last for life. When Malcolm was in high school, over one summer, uh, he played on a basketball team that went to a very high level basketball AAU tournament in Omaha, Nebraska.

Imagine this, a group of 15 teenage boys all about to go into their junior year of high school, away from home, competing together, navigating all of it side by side. The wins, the losses, the long va- van rides, the bad hotel food, the inside jokes that nobody else would understand. That was a shared experience and a shared goal at the same time.

Two rungs at once, and it built something real. Years later, those guys still have a weekly group text. They still check in. They still show up for each other, and not because they live near each other. No, in fact, they're all scattered around the United States, in college, some still playing basketball, some not, and a couple in the NBA.

Not because they go to the same school, but because one summer they had this incredibly intense physical experience in Omaha, Nebraska, together, because they showed up for something that mattered side by side. That's the ladder in action.

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That's what happens when humans, and specifically talking about kids, get to bond together on the higher rungs.

And it doesn't have to be a travel tournament for this to happen. It doesn't have to be anything big or expensive. It could be a school play, a summer camp, a neighborhood project, a choir that practices every Tuesday. Anything that puts your kid shoulder to shoulder with other kids, working together towards something similar, towards a goal with a shared interest.

That's a rung five and six environment, and what gets built there lasts I want to share something from inside the hive. As always, I've changed some details to protect the privacy of the hive member. There's a mom, let's call her Jana. Jana came to me really worried about her 13-year-old daughter, who was deep in what I can only describe as the drama cycle.

I mean, if you know, you know. Her group of friends, this group of girls, was constantly bonding over what they had done to whom, who was in, who was out, whose feelings were hurt by what someone said. And Jana described it as relentless. And her daughter was miserable, but also couldn't stop, because this was the group she had, and this is how they connected.

When Jana and I started talking about the connection ladder, something shifted for her. She stopped seeing her daughter's friend group as toxic and started seeing it as a group of kids stuck on the lowest rung. Not because they were bad kids, but because nobody had shown them how to climb up the ladder.

So instead of lecturing her daughter about gossip, Jana started asking different questions. "What do you and your friends actually love doing? Is there something you've all always wanted to try? What if you invited one of them to come with you to that pottery class you signed up for?" She stopped trying to get her daughter out of the drama and started helping her climb to a higher rung.

Slowly, her daughter started spending more time with one friend she started doing art with after school, a friend she was creating something with. And that relationship deepened in a completely different way. And the drama started to feel less necessary. Now, we can't force our kids up the ladder, but we can point them

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towards environments where the higher rungs are available, and we can model in our own lives what it looks like to choose connection to build something up instead of tearing something down.

So two things this week in the homework department. First, do an honest check-in with yourself. Where are you spending most of your connection time? Which rung do you tend to reach for when you want to feel close to someone? I'm not asking you to judge yourself. I'm asking you to see it clearly, because you can't climb a ladder if you don't know which rung you're currently on.

Make sense? Okay, and homework assignment number two, pick one rung you want to climb, with your kid, with a friend, with your partner, and take one small action this week. Plan something to do together. Sign your kid up for something. Invite a friend to come with you to something you love. Connection doesn't build itself.

Someone has to reach for the next rung. Now, here's what I want you to walk away with today. Connection is not just one thing. It comes in layers. It comes in rungs on a ladder, in levels of depth. And the higher the rung, yeah, the more it costs you, but the more it gives back. Gossip can feel like connection, but it's the most fragile rung on the ladder, and every time we choose it for ourselves or allow it to be the primary culture our kids are marinating in, we're settling for something that won't hold.

We can do better for ourselves and for our kids. Until next time, I'm wishing you peaceful parenting.

Thanks for listening to Real World Peaceful Parenting. If you want more info on how you can transform your parenting, visit thepeacefulparent.com. See you soon.