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Depressed? Reach Out For Help.....	3
Tailor Your Weight Loss Program To Your Archetype	5
Ways To Prevent Osteoporosis.....	6
Keeping Pets Safe In The Heat.....	8
Book and Media Reviews	15



CONNECTING WITH YOUR KIDS

Joanne Stern, Ph.D. says the key to parenting your child (or yourself) is creating relationships

By Judith Campanaro

Parenting is something most of us would love to do well. Parenting is also one of the most important and difficult jobs we will ever do. It is a job for which most of us are ill prepared. Joanne Stern, PhD, a well known psychotherapist, has spent more than 20 years counseling families, parents, and teens. She is a popular speaker on relationship issues and has taught numerous parenting courses. In her new book, "Parenting is a Contact Sport," Dr. Stern teaches us how to stay connected to our children for life. If you are interested in creating powerful relationships not only with your children but with all people, including a relationship with yourself, this book is a must read.

Judith: I found your book to be very powerful. The insights you share truly model how parents can build and sustain healthy relationships.

Dr. Stern: Building relationships with children is the bottom line. That's the foundation for everything that happens between a parent and a child. If you have a great relationship, then you have the opportunity to have positive, powerful input. If you don't have a relationship you lose the opportunity to be their guide and then they're on their own.

Judith: That's so true. I really like what you said about reconnecting with your child no matter how distant you may have become. Could someone use the skills that you're teaching to really

get in touch with themselves?

Dr. Stern: That's an interesting question and I do believe that you can. For example, in the communication chapter I talk about how you have to build trust with your child before you can communicate. I believe that's what needs to happen in order for you to reconnect with your own inner child. You have to create trust between the adult child and the inner child that nothing bad will happen to you if you allow that little girl to come out and expose her vulnerabilities.

The next thing I talk about with a parent-child relationship is learning to listen. The adult has probably been squashing the inner child down and not letting her come out and say what she wants to say. It's about being still and allowing and giving a voice to that little child and really listening to what the pain and the hurt from all those past years is.

The next thing I talk about in communication between a parent and a child is mutual sharing. I also talk about creating a win-win communication style between a parent and a child. The win-win with the inner child is for the inner child to know that the adult is going to give her a voice in that when she needs to say something, acknowledge her feelings or some behavior, the adult will give her the space to do that. And that the child will also let the adult manage their life because the adult is really in charge and can maneuver in the outside world.

Now you have the resources of an adult brain to think past events through and reinterpret those events. Your adult can really surround that little child with the love and caring of an adult and support that child and help her to heal. I never thought about it from this perspective but it really is quite a parallel.

Judith: Just like the teenagers in your book. That child wants to be acknowledged and feel safe. Another point I really like in your book is when you told your daughters that "Every day is like writing another page in the history of their lives."

Dr. Stern: I love that part. Every day you literally are writing a page in the history of who you are. The history of who you are flows. It doesn't just jump from one thing to another. Every decision that you make is a little bit of the flow in the direction of who you become.

Something happens in your life. Think of that event as a photograph or a painting and you already know that the frame on that painting can make the painting look much better or much worse. It can really affect the actual impression of that painting and so how we think about the event in our life is the frame around the picture. We can't change the event that already happened. If we think about it differently, it will affect us in a different way and help us make a decision about how

Joanne Stern explains that if we want to have a good relationship with children, including our own inner child, we must develop trust, mutual sharing, and the ability to listen. Children crave unconditional love and parents can reach out to them no matter how old the children are or how far apart you might feel.

to move forward.

An emotionally healthy person has the ability to love themselves in spite of themselves. If we really understand life and human nature, we are more able to embrace ourselves in the midst of a dumb mistake and say, "I love me anyway. I did this and I love me anyway."

Judith: But so many young people and adults don't know how to love themselves.

Dr. Stern: That's very true. I think that comes a lot from parents never really having given kids unconditional love because

Continued on Page 3

