

Helping Kids Deal with Trauma [Video Transcript]

Voiceover: Welcome to Connected Families' "Discipline that Connects" videocast series. For more information you can visit us at ConnectedFamilies.org.

Chad Hayenga: Hi, I'm Chad Hayenga, and I'm here today with Lynne Jackson, co-founder of Connected Families. Today we're going to talk about how do we guide our children through difficult times, and even traumatic times. How do we do that? What does that look like? Many families have experienced kids with broken bones or changing schools or moving to a new town, those kinds of things. So Lynne, I'm curious, what do parents typically do in response to those kinds of situations?

Lynne Jackson: Well, a lot of times parents have their own difficult feelings about what the child is going through that get in the way of them actually helping their child. So they might feel anxious about what's going to happen to the child, or they might feel guilty if they had a role in that. They might just be really sad about the situation. And then the child is dealing with their parents' emotions as well as their own. So practically, when my dad told me we were gonna move from a town where we had finally lived for a few years and I had loved, and we were going to move again, I ran off crying. And he was angry and said, "Lynnie, stop crying!" It was because he felt bad and guilty and he wanted to kind of subdue or dismiss my feeling so that he would feel better. Other times, often moms, I would say, get into the trap of being overly smothering. Like, "Oh, I just am going to deal with my anxiety by making sure that you're just fine, poor thing!" -- exactly, kind of overdoing it. And that's not healthy for the child, either.

CH: So what can parents do avoid that?

LJ: Well, first of all, to deal with their own emotions and to take those emotions to the Lord. I have a dear friend whose daughter is going through leukemia treatment and she starts every day with a devotional that helps her to just take her anxieties to the Lord so that she is able to guide her child through that. Another mom came to me, and her daughter had broken her arm -- her elbow -- and she was there for part of that, felt really guilty, and needed to process "How am I going to deal with my sadness so that I can help my daughter?" We came up with a very specific plan, including some specific verses and a time of day when she would seek the Lord. So then, as the parent is feeling more stable, they can more specifically help their child.

CH: So once parents are more peaceful, how can they go about helping their child through the trauma?

LJ: Well, it helps to really have a "whole brain perspective" on how you help your child, because a child needs their whole brain to get through this. There's the left brain -- that's the left-logic-language side of the brain. The child needs to know the facts of what happened, what they might be going through, what they can anticipate they're going to have to go through. That's the left brain.

And then the right brain is about the emotions related to that. So you can talk about the facts of the move or the surgery or the whatever, but then what they might feel in that process, and to really give words to those feelings. Then the other part of the brain that they need is the frontal lobe, which is about what's their plan. So it's the facts, the feelings, and the plan -- what can you do if you start to feel those difficult feelings.

CH: So facts, feelings, and plan. And my guess is that oftentimes parents might just go to the facts. I mean, as a dad, my sense is that I probably would just go, "Well here's what we're doing. Here's the deal. This is how it's going to look and this is what you can expect" -- but missing out on some of the emotion and some of the plans.

LJ: Right. And then as you kind of get through that part of the initial trauma with your child, then you can look for opportunities to build perseverance and different character qualities, because in every crisis there's a great opportunity. So Kari, after her daughter had broken her arm, we talked initially about this trauma plan and then she came in to process the perseverance part. "How can I build perseverance and neither negate what she's going through nor give in to her whining?" So together we came up with this great idea of a chain -- a paper chain, you know, with little links of construction paper -- with one link for each day until she got her cast off. So they took the link and each day at the end of the day they would clip it off and they would write on it a blessing of that day or something that she had learned, a way she persevered in doing things with only one arm, with her cast on. So they have this chain. It was really amazing what happened with that.

CH: That sounds super creative, as well as putting the focus back on what the learning is and the perseverance and "we're going to make it through this". So what was the result of that?

LJ: Kari wrote me a great email about her daughter, Selah, and, as just a five-year-old, all the things she was able to accomplish.

CH: Five years old?

LJ: Yep! When they would take some of the chains off, she would write specific things that Selah had been able to accomplish with her cast on. So one day it was about "I can brush olive oil on sweet potato fries! Mommy, write that down!"

CH: All the things I can do.

LJ: All the things I can do, as I accomplish it. So that was some of the stuff they wrote on there that really helped her to persevere. And then looking back to the time when she went through the surgery, amazing! She sailed through that so well. In fact, she looked at her hand where there was blood on the back of her hand from the IV and she said to the anesthesiologist, "Look, there's blood on my hands, just like Jesus when he died on the cross for us!" And she starts to talk about Jesus to the anesthesiologist, who had tears in his eyes. Amazing for a five-year-old.

CH: Ministering!

LJ: Yes. And then there were some “cast-off day” quotes, which were really fun. She said, “I persevered for twenty days and then BANG! It was cast-off day!”

CH: Right away. Just twenty days and it was over.

LJ: Right. And she was talking to the nurse and said, “I had a mission, and it was accomplished.” Then driving home she looked at her dad and said, “Dad, I love you. You helped me persevere with a cast on.” So this is a little girl that now really has built an identity as one who perseveres, as an overcomer. And this identity that was accomplished through this difficult situation that her mother was so upset about, will serve her well as she encounters additional trials. And her mom or dad will be able to help her look back and go, “Remember how you persevered with your cast. I know you can do this again!”

CH: So much of moving forward is remembering the past and how we’ve been able to move past that. Thanks so much, Lynne, for sharing this story -- what a great story! -- and for also giving us some perspective on how to help guide our kids through traumatic experiences that they may be going through.

And thank you, too, for joining us here at Connected Families.