

Dr Justin Coulson Parenting Boot Camp ... and 3 easy ways to make positive changes in your family starting now Week 1

## Attention is the currency of relationships

Parents consistently assure me that they want ‘the best’ for their children. They invest time and money in education, enrichment, and extra-curricular activities to give their children *every* advantage they possibly can. These opportunities are important. They help our children grow and develop in valuable ways.

However, the *most valuable* investment we can make for our children’s development (socially, cognitively, psychologically, and even physically) is one that we often overlook because of its simplicity. That one thing is taking the time to be *emotionally available* for our children.

This idea seems so simple that most of us simply nod your head in agreement, shrug our shoulders, and move on to the next big ‘fad’ in parenting. But if we do that, we will miss offering our children the most valuable advantage they can possibly receive.

Here’s a simple summary of the amazing life outcomes kids are more likely to experience when their parents are emotionally available (when compared with children whose parents are unavailable emotionally):

- Better academic performance
- Better social skills
- More liked by peers, teachers, and other adults
- Less likely to engage in delinquent behaviour, early sexual promiscuity, and drug/alcohol consumption and abuse
- Less likely to experience ‘internalising’ issues such as depression, anxiety, etc.
- More engaged living in adolescence (characterised by absorption in tasks and social integration)

Being emotionally available requires us to pay attention – close attention – to the emotional world of our children, and to respond compassionately.

***Just as dollars are the currency of our economy,  
attention is the currency of our relationships.***

### Being emotionally available

#### On my home-front ...

My eight year old daughter drove this point home to my wife and I during a recent conversation. We were conducting a parenting performance appraisal (which you can read more about on my blog). My wife asked Ella, “Do mummy and daddy make you feel important?”

Her response:

*“When you are busy you don't listen to me properly. Like when Dad's on the computer or you (mum) are doing craft you're not available to me. It feels like those things are more important than me.”*

Ouch. Those were her words, not mine. Our kids notice when we are not available.

## In my practice ...

A father told me he was having daily battles with his teenage daughter. I suggested he go for regular walks with her each morning or evening and be emotionally available, even if was just 15 or 20 minutes.

The first few walks were awkward. She felt like he had an agenda. She refused to talk. But within a week they were looking forward to their time together and talking more freely and pleasantly than they had for months. He complained to me (in jest) that he was thinking of making the walks less regular just so she would stop chewing his ear off!

## Invite Your Children Into Your Space

Whether your child is two or twenty two, being emotionally available will improve your relationships with your children. Here's how to do it:

- Go out, TURN OFF your phone, ipad or tablet, and simply be together. Then listen to your child. Don't interrupt. Don't tell them what you think. *Don't judge. Just listen.*
- It may be in a park, at the beach or on a mountain trail. It might simply be wandering around your neighbourhood, or it could be at the local cafe with an iced chocolate. Just make sure there are no distractions. *Then ask questions, listen carefully and suspend judgement.*

Your children will love being in your space and will feel special. Invite them to allow you into their space. It may take more than one date. But if you put your attention into your relationships, they'll become enriching sources of happiness and meaning for you.

*Mums and dads who make themselves available for their children have happier families and better functioning children. Kids do best with both parents being there emotionally, regardless of your family structure. Having happy kids and strong family relationships ... it's about time.*

## Activities for this week:

1. Identify the barriers to your being emotionally available to your children. Is it other siblings, too much to do, failing to understand your child's unique temperament, or something even simpler like having the radio, TV, or computer on?
2. Think of at least two things you can do, starting now, to be more available to your children.
3. Set aside some time (about 30 minutes) where each of your children can be with you or their other parent, one-on-one, this week. (If you have too many children, perhaps you might space it over a fortnight).
4. Choose one night this week (minimum) where EVERYONE commits to switch off ALL devices, screens, and other distractions from 5.30 until bed time. Spend that night as a family, talking, playing, being together.

# Dr Justin Coulson

FREE Seminar for  
Parents & Carers



**Dr Justin Coulson** is a parenting researcher, speaker, author of the forthcoming book, *21 Days to a Happier Family* and father of 6. He blogs at [www.happyfamilies.com.au](http://www.happyfamilies.com.au).

Dr Justin will be presenting for the DPC on **11 August** at Pymble & **18 August** at Forestville. Visit the DPC website for more information. [www.brokenbayparentcouncil.com](http://www.brokenbayparentcouncil.com)