



# THEOLOGY OF CONNECTION

## GUIDE

Exploring God's Heart for Connection Through Scripture





# **THEOLOGY OF CONNECTION**

Exploring God's Heart for Connection Through Scripture

Created by Empowered to Connect

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## **THEOLOGY OF CONNECTION**

Copyright © 2022 by Empowered to Connect  
Published by Empowered to Connect  
Memphis, TN 38107  
[www.empoweredtoconnect.org](http://www.empoweredtoconnect.org)

ISBN (print) 979-8-218-10006-3  
ISBN (eBook) 979-8-218-10009-4

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**Printed in the United States.**





**for caregivers embodying the love of God  
for the children they love**





# FORWARD



You hold in your hands a work that has been prayerfully compiled to encourage you in your individual or community walk towards embodying the love of God to those you support. Each of the contributing authors has experienced the unwavering faithfulness of God, and has benefitted from grace upon grace.

When Dr. Karyn Purvis co-authored *The Connected Child*, she also co-authored *Created to Connect: A Christian's Guide to the Connected Child with Empowered to Connect's* founders, Michael and Amy Monroe. In doing so, they laid out for us how the principles of connected, attachment-based, and trauma-informed parenting are reflected by the heart of our Creator.

Many Christians hold beliefs about parenting and disciplining children that are rooted in harsh, fear-based practices. As we prepared *Theology of Connection*, we at Empowered to Connect reflected on God's interaction with humanity described in Scripture. We see clear evidence of connecting practices layered and woven throughout the Old and New Testament. From the beginning of Creation until this very moment, God's heart for connection is evident.

This work was designed both as a standalone guide as well as a companion to many other Empowered to Connect resources including *Cultivate Connection*, a parenting course which is informed by the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development's Trust Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®). *Theology of Connection*, *Cultivate Connection*, and all our resources are based on best practices and research in attachment theory, trauma-informed care, and healing-centered engagement.

Whether you engage this material on your own, in your family, or in your faith community, we hope that as you pray, journal, and discuss these Biblical examples, you will be encouraged to pursue connection with others as God faithfully pursues connection with us.





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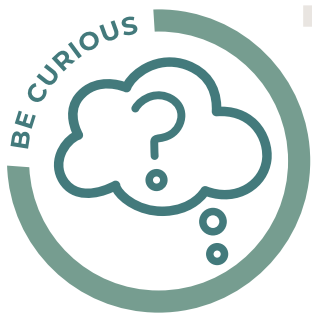




**CONNECTING PRACTICE:**  
Be Curious

**BIBLICAL ANCHOR:**  
God Sees Beyond the Surface





## CONNECTING PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### BE CURIOUS

Be Mindful of History

Be Mindful of Attachment

Be Mindful of Why

Being Curious is the foundation for all Connecting Practices. When we are curious, we become observant and reflective, as we look at what is going on with us, the child, and the environment. As we cultivate trusting adult-child relationships, curiosity allows us to understand more deeply what we and the child bring to the relationship, so we can move from automatic reactions to thoughtful responses.

### BE MINDFUL OF HISTORY

Being mindful of history helps us to become self-aware and child-aware. When we reflect on our past experiences, we can see how they impact our present, allowing us to intentionally pursue relational connection without barriers.

### BE MINDFUL OF ATTACHMENT

Being mindful of attachment begins with developing an understanding of attachment patterns and how those impact relationships. When we reflect on our attachment patterns and walk towards earned secure attachment, we can become a secure base and safe haven for others.

### BE MINDFUL OF WHY

Being mindful of the why behind behaviors, reactions, emotions, and experiences allows us to look beyond what we see on the surface. When we carry ourselves with humility, curiosity, and intentionality, we support ourselves and others from a holistic, integrated perspective.

## EXPLORE BIBLICAL ANCHOR



### GOD SEES BEYOND THE SURFACE

Scripture shows that God “does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance,” but God sees what is beyond the surface of a person or situation, to the heart of the matter. (1 Samuel 16:7)

In Genesis 4, both Cain and Abel offered gifts of sacrifice to the Lord. On the surface, they both offered part of the fruits of their labor to God. However, God saw beyond their “good behavior.” While God could see that Abel’s behavior was motivated by worship and gratitude, He was able to see that underneath Cain’s “good behavior” was an inner drive of competition and jealousy. God responded to Cain by asking Cain not about his behavior but what was under the surface: “Why are you angry?” God connected with Cain’s heart, addressing what really mattered to Cain. He continued to address what was happening inside Cain even as Cain doubled down on pretending.

On the other hand, in Acts 9, God showed a Pharisee who was hunting and murdering Christians that He sees beyond our worst behavior. As Saul neared Damascus on his way to imprison more Christ-followers, Jesus stopped him in his tracks with a question, asking, “Saul, why do you persecute me?” God knew that Saul was capable of much more than his “bad behavior.” When Paul was acting like the “worst of sinners,” God had the vision to see that he had the potential to be a force for good in His Kingdom.

Jesus taught through His life on earth that God values curiosity to see beyond the surface. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were well-known for being the best behaved of God’s people—instead, Jesus criticized their inner motives and attitudes, comparing them to white-washed tombs, clean on the outside but full of dead men’s bones. (Matthew 23:27-28) He saw past the surface of sinners’ worst behaviors to their true needs and desires. (Luke 19:1-9, John 4:1-26, Matthew 11:18-19) Jesus taught his followers to use curiosity to look below the surface of a story or a question by teaching with Parables and providing a different answer than the question that was asked. Even in Jesus’ resurrection, His followers were encouraged to look beyond what is seen as they stared into an empty tomb and learned that He was risen.

When we practice curiosity as caregivers, we reflect the heart of God, asking the Holy Spirit to help us discern beyond what we see. As we begin to gain insight, we meet our children’s true needs. In turn, our children can experience the felt safety and connection God offers as He attunes to His children.



## REFLECT



### GOD SEES BEYOND THE SURFACE

*What is your favorite example of God modeling curiosity and seeing beyond the surface in the Bible?*

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*Why do you think God asks people questions if He already knows the answer?*

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*What might God see beyond the surface when He looks at children's behavior?*

*How does this encourage or challenge you?*

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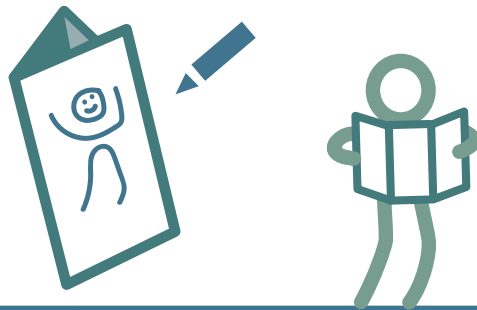
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## PASS IT ON



### PLAY: BEYOND THE SURFACE SELF PORTRAITS

- Have each person tri-fold a sheet of paper.
- With the flaps folded closed, have each person draw a self portrait.
- On the inside, pass the sheet around and have everyone write a kind word that describes the character or personality of that person.

### READ:

- The story of God choosing David (1 Samuel 16) from your favorite family or children's Bible.

### DISCUSS:

- What did God look at when He saw David? What do you think He saw?
- What does God look at when He sees you? What do you think He sees?
- How can we practice seeing others the way God sees them?

### AS YOU ARE GOING:

- When you watch TV, movies, or read stories, pause to ask what that character might be feeling or experiencing beyond the surface.
- In the car or at the dinner table, invite everyone to share how they felt mad, sad, or glad during the day.







**CONNECTING PRACTICE:**  
Balance Nurture & Structure

**BIBLICAL ANCHOR:**  
God Cares For People  
With Grace & Truth





## CONNECTING PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### **BALANCE NURTURE & STRUCTURE**

Use Nurture to Cultivate Trust

Use Structure to Cultivate Growth

Use Routines and Rituals

Balancing Nurture & Structure is a vital practice in connected caregiving. When we balance structure and nurture, we set loving limits, while supporting the child's physical and emotional needs. As we provide the appropriate amount of structure, we support the child's growth. As we provide the appropriate amount of nurture, we support the child's ability to trust others. Both are critical to secure attachment and overall well-being.

### **USE NURTURE TO CULTIVATE TRUST**

Using nurture to cultivate trust begins with valuing and prioritizing each child's unique characteristics and needs. When we nurture children relationally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually, we lay the foundation for a trusting relationship.

### **USE STRUCTURE TO CULTIVATE GROWTH**

Using structure to cultivate growth begins with identifying needed boundaries, loving limits, and supports to scaffold towards development. When we provide needed structure, we create an environment that fosters long term growth.

### **USE ROUTINES AND RITUALS**

Using routines and rituals allows us to provide predictability and consistency for ourselves and children. When we use routines and rituals, we create patterns that support overall felt safety, trust, and growth.

## EXPLORE BIBLICAL ANCHOR



### GOD CARES FOR PEOPLE WITH GRACE & TRUTH

Jesus, sent from the Father, was full of grace and truth. (John 1:14, 16-17) The life of Jesus displayed the unchanging character of God. God is full of nurture and structure in interactions with people, which allows us to flourish and thrive under His care.

God is full of grace as He cares for us. Grace is receiving more than you deserve. It is God's "yes" to us. Paul tells the Corinthian church that "...no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ." (1 Cor. 1:20) God nurtures us not just partly but in fullness. We receive blessings stacked upon blessings! As a result of God's nurturing care, His children develop trust and a deepening connection with Him.

But God is also full of truth. Truth by its very nature imposes limits related to fact and reality. Truth tethers us to what is real. While truth includes boundaries, Jesus pointed out that they don't imprison us; rather, the boundaries of truth set us free (John 8:32). The structure God provides allows us to rest in safety, secure in God's care even as it pushes us to grow through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

God also uses rituals to remind us of and to help us experience grace and truth. As the Israelites celebrated Passover, they celebrated the grace God showed them in passing over their homes even as He held those who ignored His warning accountable to truth and justice. Today, God's people publicly declare their commitment to the truth of God through baptism and the Lord's Supper. As they are baptized, it signifies the grace of God as He resurrects a new spiritual life within them. As Christians take the Lord's Supper, they remember the grace that was poured out for them as Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the law on our behalf. These rituals regularly allow us to experience connection, trust, and growth in our relationship with the Lord.

As we seek to balance our own nurture and structure in caregiving, we can ask God to make us more and more like Jesus, full of both grace and truth.



## REFLECT



### GOD CARES FOR PEOPLE WITH GRACE & TRUTH

*What are some examples of God's grace in Scripture?*

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*What are some examples of God's truth in Scripture?*

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*How do we benefit from God being full of both?*

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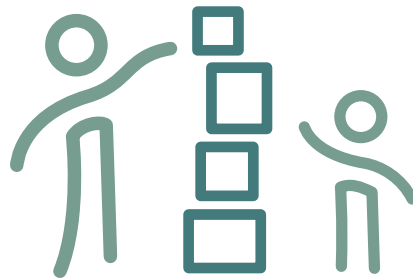
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## PASS IT ON



### PLAY: BALANCE GAME

Play a game that requires balancing objects in a tower.

Suggestions: Jenga, Rhino Hero, or build a tower out of blocks or plastic cups.

### READ:

- The story of the prodigal son's return to his father (Luke 15:11-32).

### DISCUSS:

- What did we need to help our tower grow taller? What happened when it got lop-sided or unbalanced?
- We are like that tower. We need to balance our yeses and our no's.
- What would happen if we ONLY said yes all the time? What would happen if we ONLY said no all the time?
- Does God say yes to us? How and why? Does God ever say no to us? How and why?
- Why do we need both?

### AS YOU ARE GOING:

- As you process Bible stories with children, discuss why God said yes/offered grace or why He said no/spoke truth/set limits.
- As you pray aloud, practice noticing when God says yes/no, and offer thanks for both. Discuss how we can trust God even when He says no or gives us loving limits.





**CONNECTING PRACTICE:**  
Be Present

**BIBLICAL ANCHOR:**  
God Prioritizes Presence





## CONNECTING PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### BE PRESENT

Be Physically Present

Be Emotionally Present

Be Attuned

Being Present is the essence of connected caregiving. When we are physically and emotionally present, we **attune by slowing down, paying attention to both our needs and the child's, and responding with compassion, empathy, and support.** As we stay present we are able to “be with” the child, taking a collaborative, connected stance to support regulation and growth both in the moment and over time.

### BE PHYSICALLY PRESENT

Being physically present allows us to communicate our availability to one another. When we are physically present, we prioritize relationships by communicating “I am with you” through actions and nonverbal cues.

### BE EMOTIONALLY PRESENT

Being emotionally present helps us to connect to the heart of our children. When we are emotionally present we are able to show compassion, grace, and empathy towards emotions, without becoming entangled or being dismissive.

### BE ATTUNED

Being attuned allows us to be cognizant of distractions, tune in to the needs around us, and prioritize connection. When we are attuned to the child, we are actively providing the physical and emotional support they need in the moment.



## EXPLORE BIBLICAL ANCHOR



### GOD PRIORITIZES PRESENCE

From the moment of creation, we see God the Father prioritizing presence with humankind. When Adam & Eve chose to believe that there was something better than God's plan and disobeyed God, they responded to God's presence by hiding (Genesis 3). They moved from pure vulnerability (naked and unashamed) to hiding God's creation behind fig leaves. They hid from His presence, but He pursued their presence. God came to them and met them where they were in the midst of their shame, hiding, and fear.

God strengthened the courage and faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when He promised continued presence with them as they faced challenges. Moses knew the importance of God's presence when he declared "If your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here" (Exodus 33:15). The pillar of cloud and fire gave the Israelites a visual of God's continual presence with them. David knew God's presence as his place of shelter, and the only place he could run to for help (Ps. 31:20). It was his source of joy (Ps. 16:11). David would have rather spent one day in God's presence than one thousand days anywhere else (Psalm 84:10).

In the life of Jesus, we see the picture of God's presence embodied in flesh and coming to earth to dwell among mankind. Emmanuel even means "God with us." Once again, God prioritized presence as Jesus demonstrated how to live out His example in relationship and within community.

Jesus was often seen contradicting the push of the disciples against the chaos of a crowd in order to be present with an individual and their needs. In one instance when surrounded by the crowd, He knew when a sick woman found healing by touching His robe, and He stopped to be present with her in her need (Luke 8). Another time, He lifted His eyes from the crush of a crowd to see Zacchaeus in a tree and called him down to experience His presence at a meal (Luke 19). After His resurrection, Jesus cooked fish on the shore for the disciples who had rejected Him days before to repair their connection with Him (John 21). In some of His final words before He returned to the Father, Jesus reminds His disciples that though He will be absent from them an even better presence – the Holy Spirit – would come not to just be present with them but in them (John 15).

We have the opportunity to model the priority that each person of the Trinity gave to presence within our own caregiving. We can pursue our children's presence, assure them of our presence, and attune to and meet their individual needs as we are present in the midst of our own crowded daily life. Making the choice to model God's presence to our children through our caregiving allows us to be a part of God's work of drawing them to Himself and experiencing for themselves the priority God gives to presence.

## REFLECT



### GOD PRIORITIZES PRESENCE

*Which example of God prioritizing presence is most meaningful to you, and why?*

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*How does God's presence with you empower you to be present as a caregiver?*

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*How can we show children that we need God's presence through the way we live our everyday lives?*

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## PASS IT ON



### PLAY: HIDE & SEEK

- Play a game of Hide & Seek.

### READ:

- The story of Adam and Eve hiding from God (Genesis 3).

### DISCUSS:

- Can you think of some times in the Bible when God's people tried to hide from Him? What happened?
- How does God let us know He is with us?
- What are ways we try to hide from each other?
- What is your favorite way for others to let you know that they want to be with you?

### AS YOU ARE GOING:

- Ask for and thank God for His presence while you are praying with children.
- Acknowledge God's presence with you as you are doing everyday activities—driving in the car, playing at the park, making dinner, going to bed.





**CONNECTING PRACTICE:**  
Meet Needs

**BIBLICAL ANCHOR:**  
God Created People  
With Needs





## CONNECTING PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### MEET NEEDS

Meet Emotional Needs

Meet Physical Needs

Meet Sensory Processing Needs

Meeting Needs is an indispensable part of the secure attachment cycle. When we **identify the whole child's needs, learning to recognize the many ways those needs are expressed**, we take into account emotional, physical, relational, academic, spiritual, and environmental needs. As we meet needs throughout all developmental ages and stages, it creates patterns over time that tell the child their voice matters.

### MEET EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Meeting emotional needs begins with an acknowledgement that we are emotional beings who are created to flourish in supportive relationships. When we meet emotional needs we are displaying empathy and compassion in community with one another.

### MEET PHYSICAL NEEDS

Meeting physical needs begins with seeing people through a holistic lens. When we prioritize and meet hydration, nutrition, sleep, and movement needs proactively and responsively, we empower ourselves and children to thrive.

### MEET SENSORY PROCESSING NEEDS

Meeting sensory processing needs allows us to support from an understanding of the relationship between our brain, bodies, and behaviors. When we meet sensory processing needs we honor the different ways we experience the world around us.

## EXPLORE BIBLICAL ANCHOR



### GOD CREATED PEOPLE WITH NEEDS

Many of us may consider neediness (our own or others) as irritating and inconvenient. If only we didn't get slowed down by our hunger, thirst, fatigue, overwhelm, or emotions then we could be the superheroes we all admire! However, it is important to remember that God intentionally created people with needs.

In the beginning of creation, humans were created as “needers.” God intentionally created His children with needs that highlighted that we could never be completely sufficient in ourselves. He also designed relationships as the vehicle for “needers” to become “receivers.” The relationship conduit that transforms “needers” to “receivers” becomes an interpersonal bridge that builds trust between the relaters. Trust is built when a person expresses a need (feel it, name it) and then they experience the meeting of the need (the provision).

From the beginning of time, God sought to meet the needs of people. God planted a garden to provide food for the first children (Genesis 2:5-9). God saw Hagar thirsty, rejected, and despairing in the desert and gave her water and helped her to feel seen, granting her requests (Genesis 16, 21:8-21). God provided daily manna for 40 years while the Israelites wandered in the desert (Exodus 16:1-35), and provided for Elijah's physical, emotional, and sensory needs in a season of extreme burnout (1 Kings 19:3-18). Jesus saw the needs of hungry people and fed them (Matthew 15). He also provided physical healing (Matthew 15:30) and emotional healing (Luke 7:48). Jesus promised for all who were tired and came to Him that He would give them rest (Matthew 11:28). Even Jesus experienced the limits of humanity as he got tired and hungry (John 4:6, Mark 11:12), and the Bible mentions God meeting His needs by sending angels to attend to Him in the desert (Mark 1:12).

Jesus also taught us that a picture of healthy attachment is when we are able to abide in Him the way a branch remains connected to a vine. (John 15:4-5) Abiding necessitates trust. The branch depends upon the vine to provide needed nutrients and recognizes it as the pathway for growth. A branch that is securely connected to the vine (like believers to Jesus) has the life of the vine flowing through it. It is where our identity is secured and fruits are developed. For the branch, there is no life or growth apart from its attachment to the vine. We can trust God to meet our needs as we stay connected to Him.

Our interaction with children can reflect God's rhythm of seeing and meeting needs. The limitations God thoughtfully created all of us with regularly require our children to need our care. Our attunement and response to their needs is an opportunity God has provided to build trust and connection.



# REFLECT



## GOD CREATED PEOPLE WITH NEEDS

*Why do you think God created His “very good” creation with needs?*

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*Why is depending on God difficult?*

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*What are ways children can observe us depending on God to meet our needs?*

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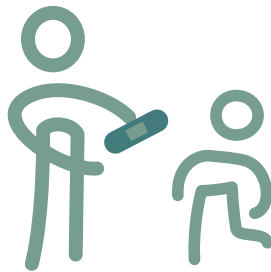
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## PASS IT ON



### PLAY: BAND-AID CARE

- Ask a child if they have any place that hurts, physically or emotionally. Take a moment to place a Band-Aid on their “hurt.”
- Next, share something that is hurting you and see if they would like to give you a Band-Aid.
- If you need a modified version, use a “Care Check In.” Ask a child or adolescent if they’d like to share something that is bothering or hurting them, then offer them support in some way: listening with empathy, giving a hug, just sitting next to them, or some other meaningful support. Next, you can share something that is hurting you and in return allow them to nurture you.

### READ:

- The story of creation (Genesis 1) from your favorite family/children’s Bible.

### DISCUSS:

- What needs did God create animals and people to have?
- How did God plan for the needs of His creation to be met?
- What needs do we have? Who meets those needs?
- How do you feel when you need someone to help you?
- Encourage everyone to share a need they have and how God and the people in your life can help meet that need.

### AS YOU ARE GOING:

- When you observe yourself needing something (a snack, patience, help opening a jar, a quieter environment), make a point to ask for help or model asking God for help.





**CONNECTING PRACTICE:**  
Use Scaffolding

**BIBLICAL ANCHOR:**  
God Scaffolds Growth





## CONNECTING PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### USE SCAFFOLDING

Set Appropriate Expectations

Support Skill Building

Practice Outside the Moment

Using Scaffolding is critical in adults assisting children's growth and skill development. When we use scaffolding, we **provide the appropriate amount of support, encouragement, or guidance needed for the task at hand.** As we use scaffolding, we enable the child to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal that is just beyond their current capabilities in the present moment.

### SET APPROPRIATE EXPECTATIONS

Setting appropriate expectations requires an understanding of the gap between our own preconceived ideals and the reality in front of us. When we set appropriate expectations for children, we set them up for success by being mindful of what they bring to the table.

### SUPPORT SKILL BUILDING

Supporting skill building helps us foster growth and increase competencies. When we support skill building we find creative ways to practice needed skills and encourage children to learn and grow in small, attainable steps while honoring one another's capacities.

### PRACTICE OUTSIDE THE MOMENT

Practicing outside the moment helps us approach needed skills playfully and intentionally. When we practice needed skills and replacement behaviors during calm, connected times, we empower the child to face future challenges.

## EXPLORE BIBLICAL ANCHOR



### GOD SCAFFOLDS GROWTH

When Jesus first encountered those who would later become disciples, He saw them where they were – with their individually unique skills and challenges. Not only did he see them where they were, but He also saw the potential that could be developed within them.

Jesus invited His disciples to come follow Him and see Him engaged with life and people in a different way. For three years, the disciples walked with Jesus and saw Him engage with people through teaching and healing. They listened to stories and teachings, and they ate with Him in the company of all types of people. They learned from Him as they walked the roads together.

Jesus encouraged the disciples to be involved in ministry together with Him. He encouraged their questions. They prepared the boats to travel, went ahead of Him into cities to find people of peace to lodge with, and they built relationships with the people who are being ministered to.

As the disciples watched Jesus and participated in ministry with Him, there came a point in their growth that He encouraged them to exercise their own faith steps in ministry, sending them to Jewish towns nearby (Matthew 10). Later, when a hungry crowd came to listen to Jesus, the disciples, as had been their pattern, saw a problem (a hungry crowd with nothing to eat) and they went to Jesus to solve it. This time, He included them in the problem-solving. “You give them something to eat,” he challenged, and then He provided the food to pass out by multiplying what they brought to Him. (Matthew 14:13-21).

Ultimately, He commissioned them (and us) to “go” and share the good news of the Gospel in His name along with the promise of His connected presence. Jesus led His disciples through the patient process of watching, helping, and then doing. He empowered fishermen and tax collectors to live fully in their calling as disciples by leading them in a progression from “Come and see” to “Go out into all the nations.”

We can follow Jesus’ example of discipleship by scaffolding the growth of our children, patiently teaching them as they watch, help, and do at their own pace.

## REFLECT



### GOD SCAFFOLDS GROWTH

*What are some examples you can think of in which God scaffolded the growth of someone in the Bible?*

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*What is one way you have grown since you first began following Jesus?*

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*What growth in your caregiving might God be scaffolding in you right now?*

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## PASS IT ON



### PLAY: FOLLOW THE STEPS

- Make a treat with children by following the steps of a recipe using a mix or ingredients.
- Alternate option: Let children help build a model or Lego structure following steps on the instructions.

### READ:

- The instructions God gave Noah for building the Ark (Genesis 6).

### DISCUSS:

- How many steps did it take for Noah to build his Ark? How many steps did it take us to make our recipe?
- What would happen if we went out of order?
- Discuss how God created us to grow from babies to adults in stages. We can't skip any steps or we will miss learning something we need for the next stage.
- God also created us to need help growing—we need help from adults and from God to grow into who He created us to be.
- What is something you have already learned how to do?
- What are some steps it took to learn that new skill? How and when did you need help?
- What is something you would like to learn how to do? How and when might you need help?

### AS YOU ARE GOING:

- Highlight the stages of learning. Point out times when you used to do something for a child that they can now do themselves. Show them how things you're doing for them today might become things they can do for themselves one day in the future.
- Point out when someone in your family or community is learning something new, especially yourself! Make an effort to model learning how to do new things.
- As you pray aloud, ask God to help you with something you are learning how to do. Praise (and thank God for) spiritual growth the way you would praise skill growth.







**CONNECTING PRACTICE:**  
Take Play Seriously

**BIBLICAL ANCHOR:**  
God Designed Creation to Play





## CONNECTING PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### TAKE PLAY SERIOUSLY

Play to Connect

Play to Cultivate Growth

Play to Redirect

Taking Play Seriously is a core element of a healthy, thriving adult-child relationship. When we take play seriously, we engage in playful interactions with the child in order to build connection, support growth, as well as to redirect misbehavior. As we embrace play as a part of our rhythm and culture, we build felt safety, disarm fear, foster joy, and reap the benefits for both the adult and the child.

### PLAY TO CONNECT

Playing in order to connect allows us to experience one another's presence in a state of rest and enjoyment. When we play to connect we take into account the different ways people enjoy playing and find ways to playfully cultivate trust and attachment.

### PLAY TO CULTIVATE GROWTH

Playing in order to cultivate growth helps us face situations in partnership with children, finding creative methods to practice needed skills. When we play to cultivate growth we build connection by bringing play into structured and learning moments.

### PLAY TO REDIRECT

Playing in order to redirect helps us to correct minor behaviors without breaking connection. When we play to redirect we promote the desired behavior playfully, without escalating, shaming, or provoking the child.

## EXPLORE BIBLICAL ANCHOR



### GOD DESIGNED CREATION TO PLAY

You may not have thought about God as One who takes play seriously, but let's consider the playfulness of God in his work and his interactions with people.

In the beginning, God created everything (Genesis 1-2). And when you think about God's creation, consider the artistry and creativity he used! He gave plants and animals an endless spectrum of colors and shapes. He designed living things with functions like the ability to breathe underwater, to glow in the dark, to swing from trees, and to blend into their surroundings. He created stars further than any human could travel and sea life deeper than any human has explored.

Not only does creation reflect play, He designed His creation to play. Dolphins have been known to stop what they are doing when large ships approach in order to ride in the waves the ship leaves behind, for the pure enjoyment of it. Reptiles have been observed enjoying play with objects like balls and floating objects, similar to the way we expect dogs and cats to play. Even an octopus will approach an unknown object with curiosity that moves from "what is this?" to "what can I do with this?" Creation abounds with the desire to play for both learning and fun.

Throughout history, God has connected to people through play. In the Old and New Testament, He instituted festivals as times to interact with him corporately in worship and celebration. He gave individuals gifts that they can use for enjoyment and pleasure. God has given us the opportunity to connect with Him anytime we exercise a gift He gave us.

We see God's playfulness in the way Jesus lived. He taught by telling stories. He replenished the drinks at a party by turning water into more wine (John 2). He used hyperbole and witty plays on words. He loved to surprise people with joy and healing.

God is holy, He pursues justice, and takes sin seriously. AND God is the creator of joy, pleasure, excitement, and fun. In the middle of our stressful and busy lives, God reminds us to take time for delight, Sabbath, and play.





# REFLECT



## GOD DESIGNED CREATION TO PLAY

*Do you think of God as playful? Why or why not?*

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*What are some examples of God's creativity and playfulness in the Bible?*

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*How has God gifted you to play with others?*

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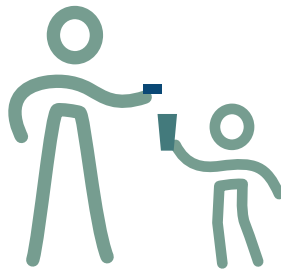
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## PASS IT ON



### PLAY: GUESSING GAME

- Have each person write down their favorite way to play on a piece of paper, fold it up, and put it in a cup.
- Next, each person pulls a piece of paper out of the cup and tries to guess who wrote it.

### READ:

- A praise psalm to the Lord (Psalm 98:1-8).

### DISCUSS:

- How do you think the author was feeling when they wrote this Psalm?
- What is something you like to do when you feel happy, glad, or excited?
- Did you know God designed us to play? We want to be able to play together and have fun in this family/community. It's a way we can spend time together and show love to each other.
- What are ways that God is playful in the Bible—can you think of any?
- God has given each of us gifts – they are talents and hobbies that we enjoy. Playing in our own favorite ways is also a way we can spend time with God and show love to Him.
- Have each person name something someone else is good at. Together, come up with ways they can enjoy being with God while exercising their talent.

### AS YOU ARE GOING:

- Notice and discuss different play styles in friends and characters in books, TV shows/movies as you encounter them.
- Read Philippians 4:8 with children and try to list as many of things as you can think of that fit Paul's description.
- Thank God for fun and joy in your day as you pray aloud.
- Point out playfulness and creativity in the Bible.





**CONNECTING PRACTICE:**  
Give Voice

**BIBLICAL ANCHOR:**  
God Collaborates With People





## CONNECTING PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### GIVE VOICE

Share Power

Offer Choices

Offer Compromises

Giving Voice is crucial to empowering the child's self-agency, which is the confidence to advocate for themselves, believing they have influence over their circumstances. When we give voice **we share power appropriately, giving win-win choices and developmentally appropriate compromises.** As we give voice we allow the child to practice telling safe adults what they need, and negotiating those needs through appropriate communication.

### SHARE POWER

Sharing power helps scaffold children towards becoming adults who can make independent, responsible, and ethical decisions. When we share power, we support children in the moment by practicing the skills needed for decision making and healthy negotiation.

### OFFER CHOICES

Offering choices allows us to encourage children to practice using their voice to communicate their wants, needs, desires, and opinions. When we offer choices we provide a balance of structure and nurture while meeting the demands of the moment.

### OFFER COMPROMISES

Offering compromises helps provide age appropriate opportunities for children to use their voice. When we allow a child to ask for a compromise, we scaffold the skills needed for collaboratively negotiating wants and needs while understanding the demands of the situation.



## EXPLORE BIBLICAL ANCHOR



### GOD COLLABORATES WITH PEOPLE

Have you ever reflected on how an Almighty God allows His children to make choices? God could have created compliant little robots that obeyed and loved Him always. Instead, He created us with a free will to make choices and negotiate our needs & desires. The sovereign, omniscient, omnipotent, Creator and Sustainer of the universe invites us to collaborate with Him as we pray “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

As God created humans in the Garden of Eden, He gave them the ability to make choices. In bestowing this freedom upon humans, God gave them personal agency and moral responsibility. When Eve and then Adam chose to disobey in Genesis 3, God encouraged them to share what happened in their own words and perspectives. The choice Eve and Adam made to disobey was devastating, but God remained connected with them. He set loving limits while encouraging them to exercise their ability to make choices in the future.

In Exodus 3, God approaches Moses and tells him to bring His people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. What happens in Exodus 4:1-17 is a conversation between God and Moses to reach a shared goal. Several times, Moses objects to God’s direction with aspects of the plan that worry him. What if the people don’t believe Moses? God gives Moses three choices of signs to show the Israelites He is from God. But Moses is worried about His slow speech. God ends up offering a compromise to allow Moses’ brother Aaron to speak on his behalf, allowing Moses a way to experience felt safety and growing trust in God as he shares God’s goal to free the Israelites.

What about us? Do you ever ask God for something you want? Do you ever tell Him what you need? How does He respond? Through prayer, God invites us to collaborate with Him. Collaboration is when “two or more people work together toward shared goals.” If we’re honest, sometimes our goals look different than God’s goals. When this is the case, God does not require us only to speak with positive words or remain silent about what we want. Both David and Job in the Old Testament are examples of men who shared their grief and disappointments with God. In collaborating with us through prayer, God transforms our hearts to look more and more like His, and He listens to us. He delights in saying yes to us. He gives us choices, and allows us to ask for compromises. True relationship with God is when we, in step with the Holy Spirit, ultimately share goals.

In a similar way, we reflect God’s heart in our caregiving when we collaborate with our children by giving them the opportunity to voice their needs and desires. Our goals to protect and provide the best for our children do not change as we allow them to collaborate with us to accomplish this goal.

## REFLECT



### GOD COLLABORATES WITH PEOPLE

*What are some other examples you can think of throughout the Bible when God gives people voice by listening to and collaborating with them?*

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*Why do you think God gives us choices?*

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*Can you think of a time God collaborated with you?*

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## PASS IT ON



### PLAY: CHOICE TIME SNACK MIX

- During snack time, pull out a variety of delicious choices to add to a snack mix. (Ideas: popcorn, pretzels, cereal, chocolate chips, dried fruit, marshmallows, etc)
- The adults act as the designated “snack mix assemblers.” Each child can ask for the ingredients they would like in their snack mix one at a time. Each time the child asks, the adult gives a joyful “yes!” to that ingredient.

### READ:

- The story of Moses’ conversation with God (Exodus 4:1-17).

### DISCUSS:

- Can you think of some times in the Bible when people asked God for something? What did God say/do?
- How does God respond when we ask Him for something? (Sometimes God says yes, sometimes He says no, sometimes He says not yet...)
- It’s so fun both to say yes and to be told yes! Our snack mix is a great example of that. It was so fun to say yes to everything you wanted in this yummy treat. But what if you had asked to put a bunch of scissors in your snack mix? Should we have said yes? What about a handful of boogers? Why would we have to say no?
- What can we do when God tells us no? (Ask for a compromise, tell Him how we feel)
- What can we believe about God even when He tells us no? (We can trust Him to do what’s best for us, He loves us)
- What about adults? How can we respond and what can we believe about adults when they say no?

### AS YOU ARE GOING:

- As you encounter stories in the Bible in which God collaborates with people, point out what God says & does and how the people respond.
- As you pray aloud, model telling God how you feel and asking for what you need. Encourage children to do the same.
- Notice together with children how God has answered your prayers.





**CONNECTING PRACTICE:**  
Respond Thoughtfully

**BIBLICAL ANCHOR:**  
God Uses Intentional  
Communication





## CONNECTING PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### RESPOND THOUGHTFULLY

Practice the Pause

Use Communication Thoughtfully

Use the Appropriate Redirection

Responding Thoughtfully is a pivotal mindset shift necessary for intentional relationships and connecting while correcting. When we respond thoughtfully, we stay self and child aware, choosing the appropriate response that meets the needs of the child, adult, and demands of the moment. As we respond thoughtfully it cultivates connection, contentment, and change, while empowering the child to learn and grow.

### PRACTICE THE PAUSE

Practicing the pause enables us to respond rather than react, taking a brief moment to regulate ourselves and assess our surroundings. When we practice the pause, we offer thoughtful responses.

### USE COMMUNICATION THOUGHTFULLY

Using communication thoughtfully helps us have the impact we desire based on our intentions. When we use communication thoughtfully, we adjust our communication to the person in front of us, bringing our relational knowledge and experience to the table.

### USE THE APPROPRIATE REDIRECTION

Using the appropriate redirection helps us de-escalate and support long term change. When we use the appropriate redirection we are able to set loving limits while maintaining connection by providing compassion, empathy, and care.

## EXPLORE BIBLICAL ANCHOR



### GOD USES INTENTIONAL COMMUNICATION

God is all-powerful and could have chosen to communicate with us in the easiest and fastest way for Himself. Instead, God used intentional communication as He walked with people in the cool of the day, came to them in dreams, sent messengers and prophets, gave signs and symbols, and His Spirit inspired people to write down His living and active words for future generations to read.

God creatively communicated with Moses by drawing his attention to a bush on fire. In His conversation in Exodus 3-4, God intentionally directed Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses was full of questions and objections, but each time, God answered and collaborated with Moses to allow Him to feel heard, validated, and empowered. Through thoughtful communication, God was able to direct Moses to become a great leader of His people.

In contrast, when God directed Jonah, Jonah ran away from Him. The book of Jonah chronicles God's intentional redirection of Jonah to reach the people of Nineveh. As Jonah fled, God pursued connection and communication with him. God thoughtfully communicated with Jonah in ways Jonah would understand—through a storm, through other people, through a big fish. When God gave Jonah another chance, Jonah obeyed. Even then, God continued to respond thoughtfully to Jonah, using an illustration of a withering plant to help Jonah grow in his compassion and understanding.

Jesus' communication was just as creative. He told stories or parables that required people to think about how the truth applied to their own lives. He listened to others, and then He used creative communication to ask questions that encouraged them to think deeply. He gently offered difficult challenges that invited people to grow. He prayed with and for others. The power of His voice rebuked storms and religious hypocrites. He also communicated in nonverbal ways through the people He spent time with, the ways He touched people, and the ways He let people touch Him.

Responding thoughtfully often takes greater time and energy, but God has shown us that we are worth His time and energy. God's intentional communication with us leads us to respond thoughtfully to our own children.



# REFLECT



## GOD USES INTENTIONAL COMMUNICATION

*What does God's communication style teach us about the purpose of His communication?*

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*How and when does God encourage us to communicate with Him?*

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*Which communication methods of God would you like to thoughtfully include in your own communication with children more often?*

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## PASS IT ON



### PLAY: RED LIGHT/GREEN LIGHT

- Play the traditional game of “Red Light/Green Light.”
- Tell children to listen closely as you give directions. (Feel free to add in extra colors. For example, purple light might mean to walk backwards or rainbow light might mean to dance, etc.)

### OR PLAY: LISTENING OBSTACLE COURSE

- Set up an obstacle course with pillows or other objects and blindfold participants. They must listen closely while the communicator directs them where to go with their words.

### READ:

- The story of Naaman (2 Kings 5).

### DISCUSS:

- Was it easy or hard for Naaman to listen to & follow the instructions?
- Is it easy or hard to listen to & follow the instructions from adults in real life? Why?
- Can you think of times in the Bible that God gave people instructions? What happened?
- How can we communicate with each other respectfully when we disagree or have big feelings?

### AS YOU ARE GOING:

- As you watch TV or movies, ask questions about the way the characters listen and respond.
- When you catch yourself reacting in ways that are not thoughtful, model saying: “Oops, that’s not very thoughtful. Hold on, let me think about how I want to respond first.”
- Memorize a Bible verse together that helps you (and children) think before speaking, such as James 1:19 (“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...”) or Colossians 4:6 (“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”)





**CONNECTING PRACTICE:**  
Repair, Reflect, Re-Adjust

**BIBLICAL ANCHOR:**  
God Pursues Restoration





## CONNECTING PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### REPAIR, REFLECT, READJUST

Repair After a Rupture

Reflect After an Interaction

Re-Adjust Expectations and Supports

Repairing, Reflecting, and Re-Adjusting are essential practices to building and maintaining healthy relationships. When we repair, reflect, and re-adjust we **cultivate trust, renew connection, and foster emotional felt safety while determining appropriate expectations and support.** As we humbly repair, curiously reflect, and continuously re-adjust, it allows us to embrace the child in front of us and stay committed to the relationship.

### REPAIR AFTER A RUPTURE

Repairing after a rupture strengthens relationships. When we humbly initiate repair after a rupture, we model taking responsibility and restoring connection while reassuring the child that our relationship can withstand ruptures.

### REFLECT AFTER AN INTERACTION

Reflecting after an interaction allows us to consider what could be changed, added, or adjusted to better prepare for next time. When we reflect after an interaction we are curious, thoughtful, and willing to learn.

### RE-ADJUST EXPECTATIONS AND SUPPORTS

Re-Adjusting our expectations and the support we provide requires us to be flexible and willing to make changes. When we make adjustments, we empower the child in front of us and support their long term growth and well-being.

## EXPLORE BIBLICAL ANCHOR



### GOD PURSUES RESTORATION

In many ways, the story of the Bible from start to finish is the story of God repairing what was broken among people. God creates, sin destroys, God restores. As we are influenced and impacted by sin, God gives us opportunities to join in His restoration work.

One example of this is Jesus' restoration of His relationship with Peter. Peter's relationship with Jesus had been ruptured. Peter denied knowing Jesus and abandoned Him during his trial. We can imagine the guilt, shame, and regret Peter experienced as Jesus was crucified and lay lifeless in the tomb.

Jesus had every right to make Peter come groveling to Him, begging for forgiveness. Instead, Jesus made the first move toward repairing the disconnection Peter had with Him. In John 21, Peter went out fishing with some of the other disciples. It was during this fishing trip that Jesus stood on the shore and called out to the men, reminding Peter of the invitation Jesus had initially given to follow Him. Jesus' bid for connection had an immediate effect on Peter—the friend Peter had betrayed had returned to give him a second chance. Peter jumped out of the boat and began swimming to shore. Instead of addressing Peter's failure, Jesus instead reconnected with Peter and the other disciples by sharing a meal with them.

After Jesus repaired their connection, He asked Peter to reflect upon his past choices. When betraying Jesus, Peter had denied even knowing Him three times. Now, Jesus gave him a chance to make a different choice. Three times, He asked Peter, "Do you love me?" As Peter reflected upon knowing Jesus, He took the opportunity to affirm His love.

In addition to reflecting upon the past, Jesus readjusted Peter's future by giving him a new mission. He gave Peter the job of taking care of and feeding His sheep, warning him that the job would be difficult and costly. Jesus knew that though Peter had been overcome with fear earlier, he was now ready to serve Jesus no matter the cost.

This time of repair, reflection, and readjustment with Peter changed Peter's life and in turn, changed the church and ultimately the world! When we take the time to repair, reflect, and readjust with our own children, their worlds will be forever changed for the better as well. We can't avoid ruptures in our relationships, but we can emerge from them stronger together if we are willing to take the first step.



# REFLECT



## GOD PURSUES RESTORATION

*What are some other examples from Scripture that encourage us to make the first move toward repairing connection in a relationship that has experienced a rupture?*

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*What would it look like for you if you relentlessly pursued connection with children the way God has relentlessly pursued connection with you? What can you do or not do to mirror the way God has treated you?*

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*How can we model repentance (repairing our connection with God) with one another?*

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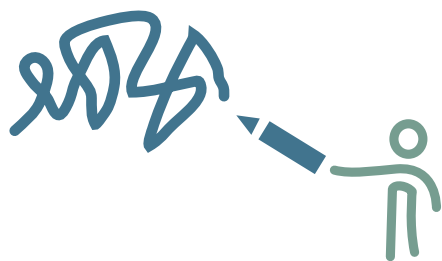
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## PASS IT ON



### PLAY: SCRIBBLE REPAIR GAME

- Give each person a blank sheet of paper and a their own unique color of writing utensil.
- Have each person draw one simple scribble or mark on their page.
- Pass the page to the right, and have that person do one thing to turn the scribble into something else. (Example, finding a way to turn the scribble into the shape of an elephant.)
- Continue passing the page to the right and having each person add on to the artwork to make it better and more complete until the page returns to its original owner.

### READ:

- The story of Saul becoming Paul (Acts 9).

### DISCUSS:

- How did God change Saul's life?
- What does our Scribble Repair Game teach us about the mistakes that we make?
- How does God treat our mess-ups? How can we treat each other when we mess up?
- When we hurt each other, how can we fix it?
- How can repairing with each other be a little like our final artwork made out of the scribbles?

### AS YOU ARE GOING:

- Find opportunities to apologize for mistakes or choices you make! Modeling apologies and reconnecting shows children how to repair and that it's safe to do so!
- As you encounter characters in books & TV shows/movies that make mistakes & wrong choices, ask children how they might repair the situation if they were in the shoes of that character.
- Look for ways to point out God's work of restoration in the world.

## CLOSING

Dear Friends,

As you complete the Theology of Connection individually or with your community, it is our deepest hope that you are captivated with the encompassing love of God.

We hope that you found new insights into God's relational pursuit of us as His Children and in doing so walk away empowered to embody the love of God, even just a fraction more than you did before.

As we are continually being renewed and sanctified, we see a beautiful picture of the scaffolded growth that God's patience, lovingkindness, and steadfast faithfulness provides for us. May we extend that same patience, lovingkindness, and steadfast faithfulness to the children and people in our spheres of influence, and most especially in our families and homes.

May the God of all hope empower you as you walk in love with one another.

Many blessings,  
The Empowered to Connect Team







