

Relationship Bank Account: Building Trust and Love with Our Kids

What is a “relationship bank account”? John Gottman, a renowned relationship researcher and expert has shown that adults involved in healthy couple relationships exchange five times more positive feelings or interactions than negative ones. Each time we do or say something positive for or to our partner, we add to our account balance of trust and love. Each time we do something negative, we make a withdrawal. Unfortunately one (1) negative interaction basically withdraws a value of five (5) positive ones. Of course this is fuzzy logic, but it’s a good way to think about it.

Gottman did not intend to apply this principle to the parent-child relationship. However it helps us frame our relationship with our kids in terms of a “relationship bank account”. There must be a significant “account balance” of positive feelings of trust and love so that when we make a withdrawal by doing or saying something negative, we don’t end up with a “negative balance.”

Think back to your childhood and your own parents. What did a relationship deposit look like? Playing a family board game? Time your parent spent listening to you? Having a special day with just you and dad or you and mom? Learning a new joke? Family dinners? Bedtime stories? These are times when trust and love are built.

Making relationship “deposits” is something you need to do regularly. Here are suggestions for ways you can connect with your preschooler to

build trust. When you read these, imagine yourself as the child who is on the receiving end:

- **Really listen.** Look at your children when talking about their day or telling their ideas. Make eye contact, and get down to their level.
- **Join your preschooler in an activity.** Maybe it’s a puzzle, pretend play, or perhaps a movie. Interact with your child, even if just for a few minutes.
- **Invite your child to help.** Include your child in household activities such as sorting or folding laundry, taking plates back to the sink, setting the table, or dusting. Welcome your child into your world and show that you appreciate your preschooler’s help!
- **Give warnings about transitions.** For example, your child doesn’t want to stop playing to come eat lunch and starts to have a fit. Think from your child’s perspective — this transition seems sudden and unexpected. Give your child warnings about what is coming next, to have time to switch gears.
- **Eat together as a family.** If possible, eat around a table, with no TV! This allows everyone to see each other, talk with one another, and eat a nutritious meal. Eating meals together is a basic and beautiful



human experience. Give this to your children as often as possible, even into their teen years.

- **Car time.** Make good use of traveling time in the car. Tell stories, play car games like 'I Spy', or sing songs everyone knows. Or have a nice conversation with your child.
- **Be funny!** A sense of humor can make life a lot easier, and kids benefit from developing a funny bone. Laughter is the best medicine, and can also bring us closer together.
- **Don't skip on the hugs.** Hug away! No one has ever found any evidence that kids can get too many hugs. However a shortage of hugs has been found to be very problematic.
- **Share family stories.** You can tell your child about your childhood or discover what it was like when grandma grew up and the family's history. It is also very helpful for kids to remember their own life stories. Talk about their past with them, asking questions like, "Remember when...?" and elaborate on a shared memory or life story.
- **Bedtime rituals and stories.** If you don't already have one, build one of your own around the basics: pajamas, bathroom time including brushing teeth, and a story. Add your own elements (maybe a prayer, or "Sweet dreams on a coconut tree.")



When we do this, it is surprising that what otherwise might annoy and aggravate us about our children doesn't provoke us to yell as much. Children also behave differently, and are calmer and more relaxed. This is because they feel safer and less anxious that we will respond negatively.

When we teach kids that we consider them important, it doesn't mean giving in to their every desire. It means spending time with them as people, and caring about their inner lives. This connection enhances our authority with our children. Building up the relationship bank account also has the nice side effect of making your punishments (when they are necessary) actually work better. They take us more seriously because they trust us, love us, and care what we think. We also model behavior that teaches our children to become people who are capable of empathy and better relationships both within the family, and with peers and other adults.



Connect with Kids . . . Even When Tired and Stressed

The point here is that we are GOING to have times when we are tired, stressed, in a hurry, or our children are just pushing our buttons, and we let ourselves do or say something we shouldn't. We need to pay serious attention to making relationship deposits. This means spending time with our children, entering their worlds, showing our love, concern, and playfulness. We must do this regularly, not just when we think we have time.

References:

- Berkowitz, Marvin W. (1998). Fostering Goodness: teaching parents to facilitate children's moral development, *Journal of Moral Education*, 27(3): 371-391.
- Bost, K.K., Shin, N., McBride, B.A., Brown, G., Vaughn, B.E., Coppola, G., Verissimo, M., Monteiro, L., Korth, B. (2006). Maternal secure base scripts, children's attachment security, and mother-child narrative styles, *Attachment & Human Development*, 8(3): 241-260.
- Brotherson, Sean. (2006). *Keys to Building Attachment with Young Children*, Bright Beginnings Series #7, North Dakota State University Extension Service, FS-631
- Gottman, John. (1998). Psychology and the Study of Marital Processes. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 49:169-197

This document can be made available in alternative formats, such as large print, Braille, or audio tape, by contacting your county Extension office. (TTY 1-800-947-3529)

Prepared by: Bridget Mouchon, Family Living Educator, UW Cooperative Extension, Green County
Editor: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension
Reviewer: Dave Riley, Extension Specialist, Child Development and Early Education, UW-Madison
Layout: Penny Otte, Office Operations Associate, Family Living Area Office, Vilas County

For more information on Parenting and Child Development, contact: Joan E. LeFebvre, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin, Extension, 330 Court Street, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521-8362, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu
September 2009