

Episode 2: Practical Ways to Interact With Children: Featuring Dr. Bruce Perry

Podcast transcript

“What we try to help them understand is that the meaningful unit of relational connection is literally seconds long. It’s not 45 minutes, once a week. You know, you don’t have to give them a psychotherapy session. You just have to see them. You have to be present with them and have a sincere, engaged moment. And, that’s a physiologically powerful thing.” – Bruce Perry, MD, PhD

Robert Sege: Welcome to the HOPEful Conversations about Child Development podcast series. I’m Bob Sege, a pediatrician and director of the HOPE National Resource Center at Tufts Medicine.

Baraka Floyd: And I’m Baraka Floyd, a community pediatrician at Stanford and HOPE Facilitator and Champion. The Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences, or HOPE Framework, emphasizes the Building Blocks that children need to thrive: Relationships, environments, engagement, and emotional growth. In this podcast, we interview leaders in child health and development in order to learn more about how to support families in creating positive childhood experiences for their children. You can learn more about HOPE by visiting our website: positiveexperience.org. Bruce, I really want to thank you for coming back for this episode.

Sege: In our first episode, we had a really wonderful and far-ranging conversation about all the factors that influence how children grow up. Of course, adversity, child abuse, all those things are terrible for kids. But, you also mentioned how relational health and rich interaction of relationships can really support children, and, in many cases, counteract some of the difficulties that they face. Now, I’d like to direct the conversation towards practical ideas for providers who are using the HOPE framework in their interactions with children. And, we’re thinking of parents, teachers, human services providers, pediatricians, pretty much everyone, coaches who interacts with kids. So for the next 20 minutes or so, let’s talk, let’s get down and dirty and talk about how those of us who care for children, including children who have some emotional issues, can best use positive experiences and the work we do to help them heal. So, welcome back.

Bruce Perry: My pleasure. Yeah, you know, the practical application of some of these concepts is surprisingly easy. And, you know, one of the things that we spend a lot of time trying to help people appreciate a little bit more deeply is when we talk about how important it is for you to be present for a child or to interact with the child or to value a relationship, and, you’re a teacher, and you’ve got 25 kids in your classroom, it’s terrifying, it’s overwhelming that, oh my God, I’m, you know, being present for 25 kids. How am I supposed to do that and also teach algebra at the same time? What we try to help them understand is that the meaningful unit of relational connection is literally seconds long. It’s not 45 minutes, once a week.

You know, you don’t have to give them a psychotherapy session. You just have to see them. You have to be present with them and have a sincere, engaged moment. And, that’s a physiologically powerful thing. It makes somebody’s stress response quiet down. It makes somebody’s reward neurobiology

activate. And, it literally has a whole cascade of positive neuroendocrine effects. And, if you have the gift of a relational milieu where there are a lot of people who will give you these little rewarding and regulating interactions throughout the day, you essentially are in a very rich, developmentally positive environment. And, it'll be easy to learn, it'll be easier to interact.

But, we talk about these P's: present, parallel, patient, and persistent. Those are the qualities that just as an adult making your way through the child's life, they end up, they determine and control the nature and the intensity of the dyadic interaction. Right. If you're driving in parallel with your teen and they start talking, and that'll be way different than if you sit across from the table and say, how was your day at school? They go, "Fine." "What'd you learn?" "Nothing." "You learn nothing? I'm going to call the school. Don't be a jerk." You know, that's the interaction with the teen. But, if you're driving them and in parallel, and there's this pattern, repetitive, rhythmic, pretty soon they start talking because they feel more regulated. But again, it's these moments. And, that's what I think is so powerful and important for folks to feel safe with. It's okay. You don't have to be like a super therapist parent all day long. Just be, find a moment, let them know you love them, you see them, you're present, and you're around.

Floyd: Bruce, I love that. One of the things I think about, especially for school-aged or young children, is the opportunity that parents have for small things like Reach Out and Read, for example, that we use in pediatric offices and taking those few minutes a day, just to read with their child. Because that allows you to be present, that allows you to have a physical connection. It allows you to do an activity with your child, and it helps their brains develop and grow. And, it just reinforces how important it is not just for us to say it's important to read, but really how it builds that relational connection. So, you have a good foundation as that child turns into that teen that might not want to talk to you very much.

Sege: And, the other thing, going back to the other providers, we go and give workshops all around the country to people and we talk about HOPE and positive experiences. And, you would not believe, maybe you would, how many times people cite a single teacher or a coach or someone who saw them for who they were. Of all the dozens of people who you interact with when you're a child, all it really takes is one person to make you feel seen and heard. And, people remember that for decades of their lives, that so-and-so saw me. And, it's just, it's a wonderful thing. And, I love what you're saying about those are the little moments of interaction that really make it, make it.

Perry: Yeah.

Floyd: What that reminds me of is the saying, "You might not remember what someone said to you, but you'll remember how they made you feel." And, just how important that relational connection and those four Ps, Bruce, that you brought up, can be.

Perry: Yeah. You know, and I think everybody, if you sort of think back on your life, there are these moments where it's one person, one coach, one teacher. And, I'm, even when you said that, Bob, I thought, came directly to my mind, one teacher and I had been, you know, no surprise to you, Bob, but I used to sit in the back of the class and goof off all the time. I've been in board meetings with Bob. He's like... Anyway, but he came up to me, and he made me stay after class, and he said, "Listen, you know, you have to stop what you're doing." And I said, "Okay." And he said, "But, you really need to keep writing." And I was like, "Really?" He said, "You should. Yeah, you're really good at writing." And it was like, wow, just that, that one thing motivated my interest and my willingness to keep writing as an undergraduate, into college and then beyond. But, if I hadn't had that little bit of encouragement, I



just don't think I would have ever even kept it in my head that I should do this or that I should practice, I should keep trying. And, I think that those moments are just powerful.

Floyd: Yeah, it is.

Sege: But, I think that going back to something we've talked about is that for all of us and even human services providers, people who have sort of a limited interaction with families, those can be really important. And, I think that all of us as professionals who work with families have heard stories about how people were treated in all the various billion things you have to do for your children. So, I like where this conversation is going.

Perry: Yeah. Yes. I get asked a lot by people that we work with. You know, when we do a lot of teaching about how the brain changes and how important repetitions are and that kind of thing. So, the obvious question comes up. Well, I only see somebody for 15 minutes. You know, how am I supposed to have an impact on their life? That's where you have to sort of back up and say, listen. The quality of the interaction can have incredibly indelible impact if somebody truly feels that you are respecting them, you're listening to them, you are seeing them, and it really has much more impact than you tend to appreciate. And, I think all of us, as clinicians, probably have stories where you had a brief interaction with somebody, and then 10 years later you find out it had some impact, and you're shocked, and it's like, really?

But, I've had so many incredible stories other people have told me about the power of, like a policeman interacting with a six-year-old kid in a domestic violence situation, simply by saying, "Hey, you know, I feel bad for you. Things are going to get better for you. Here's my lucky coin. I've had this." And he gives him a quarter, right. So, this kid is now a principal of a high school, and he pulls out the quarter and says, "Every time I feel bad about stuff, I pull this quarter out, and it's my lucky quarter." I'm like, crazy. And he gave me that as an example of how powerful these moments can be, even though they're very brief. And, I think that that's so true about, whether you're a caseworker or a teacher or you're supervising kids at lunch, they remember you if you interact with them in this specific way where you truly see them and they can feel your compassion.

Floyd: I really appreciate you highlighting a police officer example because it just highlights the fact that each and every one of us can have a positive impact on the children around us, simply by being present. And I think we don't say that enough. I think for our local communities in general, just thinking about all of the different types of people that can interact with a child in the course of their day or in the course of their life. And, thinking about it in that way makes it easier, I think, for people to get past the activation energy of, well, "How do I help? How do I contribute," just simply being present.

Sege: Can you give some ideas of exercises that people can do when they're beginning to feel burnt out or they're doing their job, and it doesn't bring them joy, how they can help do that little mental switch? Because, the most important thing that we're talking about is a change between the ears of the people who interact with children.

Perry: You know, part of what has helped us when we interact with folks that do this hard work... And, it really is hard work. You know, you get beat up by the system. You have all kinds of regulatory impediments. You are forced to do things that you know are not the best way to do. And the truth is, almost all of our systems are set up to induce moral injury in the people that do the frontline work. And what we try to encourage the people we work with to do is to think about the bubble around the areas

that you can control. That, even though all around you, it can be sort of this mess, you can create a bubble of effectiveness and of positive concern. And that's a big part of your job, to recognize where that barrier is. So, if you keep complaining about the change and suit, you've got a new leader, and he has these ideas and blah, blah, blah in your system, you can't change that. So don't, you know, you can mention it, and it can bother you, but don't let it dissolve the barrier. Spend your energy maintaining this bubble of effectiveness. And within that, you have agency.

You make a change. Even if you see somebody for 10 minutes, in those 10 minutes, you can interact in a way that will make their life better. And they're going to take that out of your interaction and they will pass that on. That's just the nature of the neurobiology of social contagion. And so, we keep reminding people that they're much more effective than they think they are. And help them understand, listen, you're obviously not going to be effective to change your new boss. You can't change him. He is the way he is. But, you do control what happens when somebody comes in, sits in front of you. And that's actually a much more important area of impact anyway because they're going to leave this organization, they're going to go out in the neighborhood, interact with their kids, and their kids are going to act with other kids, and you literally are going to create this billiards game of positive energy, and it's going to make a difference in the world.

And, I think one of the biggest things about burnout and moral injury is when you feel like you have no impact, you know, that sense of helplessness, you can shift that. I mean, if people recognize you're not helpless, you are an agent, you're an effective agent of change. You may not see all of it, but it's going to happen. So, that's a big part of what we do. It's kind of psycho-educational. We try to give people little mental exercises to kind of go, all right, what are you upset about? What's important to you? Can you change that? All right, put that in that bucket. And then, you go, can you influence some stuff? Maybe. How do you do that? You can write a letter. Okay, write a letter. But, what can you control? And so there are these three different circles, if you will: one is where you have no impact. The other one is sort of you have influence. And the inner one is you; you have control there. And when you have a sense of efficacy, it really does help.

Floyd: Sorry, go ahead, Bob.

Sege: Bruce, I love what you just said. And, also when we think about relationships, they're not one way. And, I find myself when I'm in practice and I start asking these questions, it brings a joy to me because I can see what parents have put in, what their strengths are, all the good stuff, as well as my checklist of problems. And, I end up admiring people and feeling better at the end of the day because I think the thing we forget about relationships is we're not just doling out relationships like we dole out penicillin. We're entering into a relationship and it can bring some of the joy back.

Perry: Exactly. Yeah. That's so true. I just think the most important thing that people need to hear is that what you all are doing about centering positive relationships and the power of connectedness and being in connection, that's central to the problem-solving process. For every field that we have right now, all the things that we're trying to deal with, whether it's mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, whatever system you're in, whatever activity you do, if you don't center the positive relational stuff we've been talking about, you're going to be frustrated by your problem-solving process. It just, you will tinker around the edges, but if you don't center this stuff, it won't lead to big change.

Sege: Thank you so much.



Floyd: So, thank you again for spending time with us today. I want to make sure that we recap the high points for our listeners. So last week, you told us about how children’s brains respond to positive and negative experiences and experiences of all kinds. One of the things that you highlighted was despite the fact that we have all of these ways of virtual connection, the in-person connections and relationship building is so very important for children because it activates different parts of the brain, and that repetitive interaction is very important. And, building community is important to build engagement for relational interaction, and also to help take some of the load off from parents so that they’re not having to do everything because we’re meant really to live in community.

The other thing you highlighted that I thought was really interesting was the power of proximity, and how when we place people in the same place, it really allows for social contagion to happen by building relationships. And then finally, I just want to highlight you talked about these four P’s: being present, being in parallel, being patient, and being persistent, and how that allows for you to tap in with a child for a short period of time. And, that practical application of supporting the relational health of a child is actually easier than we think. And, I really appreciate that because so often for me, especially as a pediatrician and talking with families, they’re often like, “But, I don’t have time.” And, so I think that’s one of the things I really want to speak into my practice.

And, then the last thing I want to highlight is thinking about burnout from the perspective of the bubble of effectiveness and positive concern, and how when we think about the things that we actually can control and leaning into the positive experiences, positive interactions is really the way that we make change. And, that’s why we all started this work in the first place. So, thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today.

Perry: My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Sege: The HOPEful Conversations about Child Development podcast was produced by Kris Markman and Patricia Reyes at the Tufts Clinical and Translational Science Institute. Funding for this podcast was provided by the Freedom Together Foundation. For more information, transcript, and resources related to today’s HOPEful conversation, please visit us at positiveexperience.org or follow us on LinkedIn.