

## **The ABCs of Raising Kid “Connectors”: Five Lessons in Connecting That Will Set Your Kids Up for Success Now and in the Future**

*There is a very important skill that your kids probably aren't being taught in school. In fact, it's probably not even on your Parenting 101 radar. That skill is the ability to truly connect with others. It's a skill you must address, and one that will play a huge role in a child's long-term success in life.*

By Maribeth Kuzmeski

As parents know all too well, there is no “Official Guide to Parenting” brochure handed out when you bring home your first child. Instead, parents must decide what lessons they want to impart to their children. Some of those teachings will fall into the “life lessons” category: *Be kind and respectful to others. You're responsible for your own actions. Choose your friends wisely.* Others might be more tangible; for example, teaching kids how to ride a bike or how to manage money. But there's one lesson that too many parents let fall by the wayside—one that leads to a lifelong skill with huge long-term implications.

For adults, the ability to form strong connections with those around us is critical in both our professional and personal lives. But those skills are just as important for the development of our children! When kids learn early on the key skills needed to become socially confident, and they also have the extraordinary talent of being able to truly connect and create valuable relationships, the benefits these skills will provide throughout their childhood and in the future are limitless.

Creating strong relationships, business and otherwise, is the focus of my latest book, *The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life* (Wiley, September 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-48818-8, \$22.95). It's packed full of tools and techniques aimed at helping readers develop better, more profitable connections—tools and techniques proven effective by some of the world's most successful professionals. And though my book's advice is directed at adults, it's advice that can have just as important a payoff for children and teenagers.

Being truly great connectors and masters of relationship development will set your children apart from the pack. It's a skill that will dramatically aid them when applying to top schools, earning powerful references, landing a coveted job, and getting promoted quickly. And that's just the business side of connecting. Being able to connect is an important skill to have for every aspect of life, from making friends to getting married to raising a family.

Developing relationship skills may sound simple, but if you have your own children or regularly interact with them, you know that teaching kids and actually getting them to learn are two different things. Here are a few relationship-builders for kids that will help them cultivate their connecting skills:

**Killing with kindness works every time.** Do your kids make a positive impact on the people with whom they meet and interact? A great way to teach them how to do so is to explain to them that saying great things is good, but asking great questions is even better.

This past Mother's Day one of the 12-year-old boys in my neighborhood came up to me and said, "Hello, Mrs. Kuzmeski. Are you having a nice Mother's Day? I hope so." I thought, *What a smart, likeable young man.* Later I asked my own kids, ages 13 and 15, how many moms they talked to on Mother's Day, excluding me. The answer was zero. I shared with them what one of their friends in the neighborhood said to me and how it made me feel. They were really impressed and thought it might be fun to try it for themselves. Now, we frequently discuss the importance of asking great questions. My daughter in particular has found that complimenting and asking great questions really helps build and strengthen relationships.

The key is helping your kids understand the power they have within themselves to make someone feel good just by saying something in a nice, caring way. Teach them that saying something nice gets you remembered, no matter how old you are.

**Listen for the "remarkable."** In every conversation you have with someone, that person will say something unique and remarkable. If you teach your children to listen for those "remarkables," they can use them to connect with people on a different level.

Teaching kids how to find the "remarkable" can almost be a game for younger children. Give them a short scenario. For example, "Mrs. Harper, the woman with the brown eyes, blue shirt, and bright pink fingernails, was out walking her very funny-looking wiener dog, Oscar." Then ask your child, "What did I say that you remember?" The key is teaching them how to carefully listen for that unique element in every conversation. Once they've mastered picking out the remarkable in the scenarios you've given them, teach them to repeat the remarkable back in the form of a question. For example, to Mrs.

Harper they might say, “Mrs. Harper, how is your wiener dog, Oscar, doing? I think he’s really cute. If you ever want me to dog sit, I’d be happy to!” Listening for the one thing that sticks out can be very powerful. It’s a sometimes difficult skill for both adults and children to master, but the benefits of doing so can be endless.

**Smarter is not always better.** There are tons of successful businesspeople out there who didn’t ace all their classes in high school, go to the best universities, or have the best math skills. Being book smart may set you up for the most logical chance for success in life, but it isn’t the *only* path to success. In fact, high levels of social and emotional intelligence can be far greater indicators of success in life than high grades in school.

Sure, we all love it when our kids ace a class or get the highest grade on an important test. But focusing on who your children talked to during the day, what they said, and what was said back to them is an excellent way to enhance their academic education. We can’t force our children to reach out and connect with others. But when they see how powerful it can be when they do reach out, it can alter the way they think about communicating. Instead of grading only your children’s academic achievements, give them a grade based on the positive impact they had on others during the school day. And ask their teachers how their communication skills are and where they could use improvement. Honing kids’ communication skills during the earlier years of their education will have significant long-term effects on their college careers and professional lives.

**Be a connector role model.** The best way for kids to learn connecting skills is to see them consistently and effectively performed by you. Be a connector yourself and point out those actions to your kids.

Restaurants are a great place to practice connecting. Start by asking your server his or her name. The lesson? People prefer to be called by their names. Explain to your kids that the goal as a family is for your table to become your server’s favorite table. Then show them how to do it. Teach them effective icebreakers such as asking what your server’s favorite thing is on the menu, or simply how his or her day is going. Always let your kids order for themselves, asking them to pay special attention to using “please” and “thank you” as often as possible. It usually just takes a little push to get your kids started. Once they’ve learned to create a level of comfortable conversation, any shyness they might feel about speaking with people they don’t know will quickly fade away. The same skills can be used in all sorts of environments. Other icebreakers might include asking salespeople which products they prefer, asking teachers their favorite book or favorite subject to teach, and on and on.

**Reward connector behavior.** Remember that kids can have short memories, so the best way to get them to remember your lessons in connecting is to reward them when you see them going the extra mile to truly connect with those with whom they interact. After all, what gets rewarded gets repeated!

With kids, it's all about focusing. When you let your kids take the connecting reins, pay close attention to what they say and do, and then give them positive feedback. You'll likely find that sometimes you're not even the one who does the rewarding. Many times the person with whom your child is connecting will reward him or her either verbally or materially.

For example, a friend of mine has been helping her son develop his connection skills. Recently, she told me that she was given a room with a less-than-desirable view in a hotel in New York City. Her son was with her, so she asked him to watch and listen as she very nicely told the front desk that she was a writer who would be trapped in the room for two days working. Her son listened carefully as she asked if there was anything the desk clerk could do to get them a room with a better view. Not only did the desk clerk move my friend, but she also upgraded her! The next time she was in New York City with her son, she asked him to recall how that situation was handled. Then she let him handle the check-in process at the hotel. She said he did such a great job connecting with the desk clerk that they ended up with more free stuff than they had ever gotten before, as well as the most amazing room!

The flip side to rewarding good behavior is to teach your kids to recognize it and acknowledge it in others. Teach them to let a restaurant server or salesperson's manager know when they've received excellent service. The person will greatly appreciate it, and you never know what thanks you might get in return.

Helping your kids learn to truly connect with others will take time, patience, and a lot of effort. But teaching them to put others before themselves will be an attribute that pays off for them throughout life. There is nothing more important in lifelong success than the ability to relate powerfully to others. And it is never too early to begin teaching that valuable lesson to your children!

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### **About the Author:**

Maribeth Kuzmeski, MBA is author of *The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life* (Wiley, September 2009). Creating strong business relationships has been the focus of Kuzmeski's business and career. Her book, *The Connectors*, is packed full of tools and techniques aimed at helping readers develop better, more profitable connections—tools and techniques proven effective by some of the world's most successful professionals.

Maribeth is the founder of Red Zone Marketing, LLC, which consults to Fortune 500 firms on strategic marketing planning and business growth. Maribeth has personally consulted with some of the world's most successful CEO's, entrepreneurs and professionals. An internationally recognized speaker, she shares the tactics that businesspeople use today to create more sustainable business relationships and sales and marketing successes.

She is the author of 4 books, has frequently appeared on TV and radio, and has written articles on marketing strategies for hundreds of publications including Business Week and Entrepreneur. She regularly speaks to audiences on topics relating to business development, marketing, and sales strategies.

Maribeth graduated with a degree in journalism from Syracuse University and has an MBA from The George Washington University. She lives in the Chicago, IL area with her husband Rich and 2 teenagers.

**About the Book:**

*The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life* (Wiley, September 2009, ISBN: 978-0-470-48818-8, \$22.95) is available at bookstores nationwide, major online booksellers, or directly from the publisher by calling 800-225-5945. In Canada, call 800-567-4797.

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