

INTRODUCTION

*Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
You will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.*

— Isaiah 58:9 (NIV)

The longing of the human heart is to connect and belong. We long to connect with our Creator, in whose image we have been made, and by God’s grace such a connection is possible. As relational beings we also have a deep need and desire to connect with those around us. One of the most important and meaningful human connections is undoubtedly between a parent and a child.

Our purpose for writing this study guide is to illuminate the biblical background and parallels that support the guiding principles set out in *The Connected Child*. In that sense, I am often asked if *The Connected Child* is a “Christian book.” If that question is meant to try and fit the book into the category of books published by a Christian publisher and written exclusively for a Christian audience, including in its pages frequent references to Scripture, my answer is that the book does not fit that standard definition of a “Christian book.” If, however, that question is meant to determine whether or not the principles of *The Connected Child* are consistent with Scripture and if the very motivation for my work begins with and grows out of my own personal faith and my steadfast belief that the grace of God can redeem not only our broken spiritual condition but also our physical and relational brokenness, well, my answer is an emphatic, “YES!”

This study guide is designed as a companion to *The Connected Child*, a book co-authored with my colleagues Dr. David Cross and Wendy Lyons Sunshine. This study guide is designed to complement the book and I believe you will gain most from this resource if you spend meaningful time reading and reflecting on what we have written in *The Connected Child*. Each chapter of this study guide contains insights, Scripture, new stories and illustrations and information that will help you better understand and apply what we introduced and explained in *The Connected Child*. We believe that as you work through these pages—whether by yourself, with a spouse or as part of a small group—you will better understand the philosophy and approach for the holistic model of parenting that we advocate, which has helped bring hope and healing to countless children and parents. As you do, our prayer is that you will develop a closer connection not only with your children, but also with your Heavenly Father.

Children from Hard Places

The Connected Child and this study guide were written to help you better understand the challenges and needs of “children from hard places.” Additionally, these resources, together with the many other resources on the Empowered To Connect website (www.empoweredtoconnect.org), are aimed at providing the necessary insights and tools to help children heal and become whole. Maybe you have already adopted or are currently a foster parent; maybe you are considering adoption or foster care or are in the waiting process; maybe you are a social worker, orphan care provider or caregiver; or maybe you simply want to understand better how to connect with at-risk children. Regardless of your motivation, we believe these resources can help prepare and equip you to better love, serve and care for the children that God has brought into your life.

Our research and that of others has revealed that there are six primary risk factors that are predictors of children from hard places. These risk factors are: prenatal stress, difficult or traumatic labor or birth, medical trauma early in life, abuse, neglect, and trauma. Based on this list, it is clear that this term, “children from hard places,” accurately describes many more children than merely those who were institutionalized or adopted later in life. Further, it is well established that children impacted by adoption or foster care have all experienced some degree of loss and, as a result, are more likely to encounter a variety of questions and wrestle with different issues relating to that loss and the grief and pain that flow from it. With so much seemingly working against these children and those who love them, it may be tempting to feel defeated and believe there is little hope.

Do not despair—there is hope! As we wrote in the opening chapter of *The Connected Child*, “if you’re ready to help your adopted child not just behave but blossom and to empower the healing connections that will bring greater joy to your family,” this study guide (and this journey) is for you. There is an undeniable truth that everyone who loves a child from the hard places must remember: *the past affects the future ... but it does not have to determine it*. It is this foundational truth, and a steadfast faith in and dependence on the One who delights in redeeming and restoring the brokenness of this world, that we pray will sustain and offer you lasting hope as you travel to the mountaintops and through the valleys of this journey.

At the same time, it is important to remember that we do not offer a magic formula or a quick fix. Instead we offer hope born of experience and proven tools that are supported by research. This research and experience makes clear that children can make tremendous strides in overcoming these challenges, and you are an unmistakable part of God’s plan to help this happen. With that in mind, our goal is nothing less than to empower you to become a healer for your child, and in so doing, rediscover the joy in parenting. Through this process, you will have the privilege of empowering your child to fulfill all that God has called your child to be and to do.

Returning to Old Wisdom

In many ways, my book and this study guide represent a kind of homecoming for me and my work. *The Connected Child* was born out of years of seeking to understand and apply God’s practical mercies in the lives of adopted, foster and at-risk children. Our desire is that in this guide you will discover a deeper sense of the mercy and grace that is found only in the presence of our loving God, and that in His presence you will find hope and strength for the journey.

The wisdom of Solomon’s words certainly applies to this book and our work—“there is nothing

new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9, NIV). We take no credit for creating the interventions we teach. Rather, in many ways we have simply harnessed the practical wisdom of parents from generations past and combined it with a wealth of research findings from the last 50 years. In that sense, I believe we have proven the old adage to be true—good research scientifically documents the truths that your grandmother knew instinctively.

The Connected Child is essentially a synthesis of this wisdom rooted in Scripture, practiced by generations of parents and applied in helping children make healthy and healing connections. My work for the past decade, together with my colleague Dr. David Cross, has been in developing interventions for at-risk children, and in that process we have synthesized a holistic approach to parenting wounded and hurting children that we refer to as the Trust Based Relational Intervention™ (TBRI) model (developed through the Institute of Child Development (www.child.tcu.edu) at Texas Christian University). I believe that this parenting style reflects God’s love for us as His children. His love for us is made tangible in practical ways, and we believe that our parenting must also make our love for our children tangible in practical ways that they can understand, accept and apply.

The Balancing Act

As you engage with the insights and information in these pages we ask that you do so with an open mind and a receptive heart. A temptation for some Christian parents is to use lectures, sermons and even Scripture itself as their only means of admonishing, teaching and correcting, thinking this is God’s prescribed way of relating to their children. Always quick to correct, they administer harsh and swift punishments based on rules and laws, but neither they nor their children find joy in their shared relationship. Others are prone to err on the side of “cheap grace.” Compelled by their children’s early histories, these parents don’t want to ask too much; tragically, their permissive relationship fails to create trust in their children.

In this study guide we want to point you to a different way—a way that we believe is far better and a way that we are confident will help you better reflect the heart of God for us and your heart of love for your child. Our children need a balance of equal parts nurture and structure and we would do well to look to how Jesus taught and interacted with people as our guide and model for connecting with our children. Always mindful of the whole needs of the people with whom he interacted, when Jesus taught a hungry crowd he was also moved with compassion to feed them and heal their sick. As Jesus taught his disciples, Scripture is replete with examples of how he relied upon stories about nature and parables about human behavior to relate to both their hearts and minds. And when he stood with Mary and Martha at their brother’s tomb, he wept with them, even as he surely knew he was about to raise their brother from the dead. Jesus often quoted Scripture, but just as often he used stories about life and the surrounding creation to teach his followers in tangible ways that they could understand and apply. Even in his last days on this earth, Jesus was focused on connecting with people who, in the image of God, were created to connect.

It is our greatest hope and desire that this study guide will empower you with practical tools and insights that allow you to mirror the love of God as you build stronger and more meaningful connections with your children.