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Words That Matter: Connecting with Your Child Transcript

Cindy Lopez: *Welcome. My name is Cindy Lopez, the host of this CHC podcast, Voices of Compassion. We hope you find a little courage, feel connected and experience compassion every time you listen.*

In today's episode, we dive into the power of words and how they shape your child's sense of self and connection as we talk with CHC expert Ariela Laibson, LCSW, Care Team Manager at CHC. Ariela shares valuable soundbites for parents and caregivers. You'll hear what to say at moments when your child makes a mistake, feels lonely, or even achieves success. She shares practical phrases and approaches that communicate compassion, foster belonging, and show your child that they are valued no matter the circumstance. So tune in to discover how your words can nurture resilience, confidence, and deep connection with your child.

So welcome, Ariela. I'm so glad that you could join us today, as we discuss the connection that we make with our children every day. Before we dive into the conversation, why don't you tell our listeners a little bit more about yourself?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: Thanks so much, Cindy. As you mentioned, I'm Ariela. I'm a licensed clinical social worker, and I have had the pleasure of working at Children's Health Council for three and a half years now, started as a clinician, and I've just recently transitioned to become the care team manager. So I will be taking on lots of new responsibilities in addition to continuing to be a clinician.

Cindy Lopez: Wow. And to our listeners, our care team is really pivotal for all of you. When you reach out to CHC, our care team are the people that you will be connecting with. And I'm going to make sure that we give you all that information at the end of this podcast episode, so you have that, for our listeners.

So Ariela, I think we all know that words matter, especially to our children and youth. And we all want to feel valued and significant and loved and accepted. And there are times when our children need encouragement, times when they need prompting, times when they need to know boundaries. So, let's talk about some of those specific times,

and what parents might say at those times. How do you connect with your children in those different ways?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: That's a really great question that you're asking about connection. There are so many different things that we, just as individuals, say without necessarily realizing the impact that our words may have or that our tone may have. So I think one of those times when parents may really need to have some kind of connection conversation with their children is when they've made a mistake. And so we know, like, making mistakes is part of being a human. Everybody makes mistakes. None of us is immune to that. So, as a parent, like, sometimes these mistakes might not make sense to us. We might be thinking, like, how could someone make this kind of mistake? And that might mean we need to take a deep breath and regulate our own emotions before we even start to address our children cause we know if we approach our children with anger, that's likely to elicit more frustration, that's likely to elicit a different kind of response than if we are trying to be understanding. So I think first it's regulating our own emotions 'cause the goal at the end of the day is for them to understand everyone makes mistakes, right? That's part of being a person, but we can do something when we make a mistake. So you might say like for younger children, something like, "Mistakes help us learn and grow." So they can understand mistakes are opportunities, right? We can learn from these mistakes. I mean, a similar message for older kids, just utilizing language that might be more palatable to them, like, "Mistakes are opportunities for growth." So that may feel a little more mature for the middle or high schooler. And then I think the important part is like, what can we do now? How can we move forward from here?

Cindy Lopez: Yeah, as you're talking too it reminds me a lot of growth mindset, like making mistakes is how we learn. So we don't want to always protect our kids from making mistakes or failing, so to speak, but we want to be there to help them kind of unpack that when it does happen. And so I think it's really important the things that you just mentioned, like, mistakes help us, mistakes are opportunity for growth, and then how do we move forward. I think that's a pivotal piece for all parents and caretakers. And often when we make a mistake, especially for our children and youth, their confidence takes a hit, their self-esteem takes a hit. So how can parents and caregivers respond in that kind of situation?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: So, I mean, you're absolutely correct, even though we know everyone makes mistakes, there is often a feeling of, like, I should have known better, that really can make any individual of any age feel negatively. So, one thing parents can do is try and focus and identify the positives that you are seeing your child do, and state this to them, so they're aware that you're seeing it. They may not even be completely

aware that they're doing positive things. So that could be something like, I love all the colors that you used in your picture. I really appreciate how you helped your brother with his homework, like, that was really kind of you, or you and your friend sound like you're having so much fun in the other room together. It's just stating a positive, helping them to be aware, also letting them know, you're noticing.

Cindy Lopez: Yeah. And I think that's so important, too, for parents to be aware of the opportunities, to have those kinds of connections with their kids and to make those kinds of statements. Often, I think as adults, we get into our own thing and get focused on that. And then we can lose sight of what's going on with our kids. And so what you were just talking about, Ariela, just makes me think about how parents can be in the moment with their kids and give them some positive feedback and reinforcement. And my background is education. So, everything kind of gets filtered through that education lens. And as a teacher, hopefully, teachers are doing a lot of that during the day, really focused on giving their students that kind of positive reinforcement when they see it. And same thing parents and caregivers can do too. And another concept I think that comes across clearly in growth mindset work too, but, just in everyday connection with your kids, thinking about the effort that your kids are putting into whatever they're working on. So just wondering if you have thoughts about that.

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: Yeah, I think really as a parent trying to focus on the effort as opposed to the outcome is something that can be really helpful, right? And we know, again, as adults, sometimes you can feel like you are trying your absolute hardest and you still aren't seeing the outcome that you would hope for and the same is true with kids. They may feel like they are studying as hard as they can, and they still aren't getting As on their tests.

And that doesn't mean that they aren't trying, right? It doesn't mean that they aren't truly giving it all that they have, but maybe they need additional supports. And if we just focus on the fact that maybe they aren't earning As, that's gonna be another significant hit to their self-esteem. So, trying to focus on the effort, like, way to go having a positive attitude. I can tell you're trying your hardest, and that's what's important.

Another thing, when you were mentioning education brought me back to when I worked in a school setting. And one of, I think the most important things I learned from the teachers that I worked with was to do your best to use positive language and avoid using negative language. And this is something I share with parents all the time because we can usually get the same message across by shifting our language. So instead of saying, like, "Be quiet." We can say, "I really like when you use your indoor voice," right. Instead of saying, "Stop running," "I appreciate when you walk," or

“Remember, we walk when we’re inside, right?” “Stop interrupting” can become like, “Thank you for waiting.”

Cindy Lopez: Yeah.

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: And so the more negative language we use with kids, again, is something that affects their self-esteem.

Cindy Lopez: Yeah, it also gives parents and caregivers the opportunity to, when they say something like that, “I really like when you use your indoor voice.” It just reminds the kids about, oh yeah, we have talked about this before and yeah, there is a difference between an indoor voice and outdoor voice. Oh yeah, we did talk about walking through the kitchen, you know? So it’s an opportunity for caregivers and parents to just kind of reiterate too some of the expectations that have been previously communicated.

I also know that it’s hard for parents, I think, to connect with their kids. So kids come home at the end of the school day. How was your day, right? And then the child doesn’t really communicate. “It was okay. It was fine. I don’t know.” You know?

Sometimes I think parents and caregivers see that something’s going on with their child, but their child isn’t able to articulate that. So what can parents do when they feel like their child needs to be heard?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: So yes, this is something most parents that I’ve worked with have brought up, like, how was your day? “Fine.” No more details. Or their child is maybe seeming upset about something after school, but they aren’t forthcoming with the information. So I think sometimes, we need to be more specific with our questions. Instead of, how was school? We can ask, how was English class today? What did you do in math class today, right? That requires an open ended response. They can’t just say, like, “Good,” “Bad.” Sometimes, if it’s seeming like your child is wanting to talk, but might need a little encouragement, you may want to clarify, like, “Is there something on your mind that you want to share? Do you want me to listen? Do you want me to offer suggestions?” Let them choose what they are willing to disclose and how they want you to be there to support them in that kind of disclosure, right? Kids get so few choices, really, in life, that it’s nice to give them some control.

If they want you to just listen, like, “Yeah, something happened,” just listen. Do what you can to be an active present listener. So look at them, direct your body towards them, utilize positive body language, you know, maybe nod or smile as they’re sharing information if that’s appropriate. If they want your feedback, then first we want to make

sure we're hearing them accurately. So we want to reflect their statements back to them. That could be, "It sounds like you're having some challenges in your math class and you're wanting my suggestions about ways that we can problem solve, is that right?" And that, again, gives them the opportunity to say, like, "Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying," or "No, that's not what I was saying I need at all." And something that I think is really helpful for all parents and caregivers and friends, in addition, is, like, providing some validation.

When someone shares something that's on their mind, letting them know, like, "Yeah, that does sound like a challenging situation. I can understand why you're feeling this way," right? We've all experienced challenges like happiness, exciting times. It's nice to have someone understand and share in that emotional experience with us.

Mike Navarrete: *CHC's Voices of Compassion podcast is made possible by the generosity of people like you. To learn more about supporting CHC, go to chconline.org/donate. Also make sure to follow us on social media for more inspiring and educational content from CHC.*

Cindy Lopez: For our listeners, just so you know, we recently released a podcast episode on validation specifically, so, you could learn all kinds of things about validation and how to use that tool effectively in your communication with your kids, even. And also as you're talking, Ariela, it brought back to me just this idea for parents and caregivers to be curious, to just kind of start with curiosity and think about, I wonder why my child is walking around sullen today after school, or I wonder why my child is, you know, walking with a little pep in her step today. Like, if you are curious about it, I think you start noticing things about your child and it also gives you an opportunity to say, "Hey, I'm noticing like you seem a little bit, happier when you came home from school today, I'm wondering if something good happened," or, you know, just that idea of curiosity, I think keeps coming back and it's come up in several podcast episodes we've done recently, too.

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: Absolutely. I think you are completely correct. When we make assumptions, like we're often incorrect. So coming from a place of curiosity, asking those questions is a really important part of open communication and understanding.

Cindy Lopez: And I think sometimes our kids just need to know that they are loved and valued and accepted and that they belong. And so what can parents do? What can caregivers do to really reiterate that?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: So yes, absolutely. **We know research has been done on the benefits of telling a child, “I love you.” And so we know it helps children feel accepted, loved, liked, safe, secure, valued. So all really important things that go into building strong self-esteem and a healthy sense of self.** So something a parent or caregiver can do is to tell your child, “I love you.” And that might sound obvious, but it isn’t for everybody, right? Not everyone was raised in this way. You can also be more specific: “I love your sense of humor. I love how creative you are. I love how, even when things are really, really tough, we still can come together and work through it. I love what an awesome friend you are.” So these things also, let your child know, like, they’re loved and they have these positive attributes that are part of what adds to the love that you feel for them. I think something that comes up a lot in my work with kids is making sure they know that even when you have an argument or a fight or disagree with each other that you still love them and that disagreement in no way negates the love that you have for them. So, you know, for younger kids, that could be like, I love you no matter what, even if mommy’s upset, I love you. For older kids, that could be something like, after an argument, “I’m not happy with how you behaved in this situation and that doesn’t change how much I love you, right? Even though we both seem pretty upset with each other right now, I love you regardless,” can really help kids understand that, like, those two things are not mutually exclusive.

Cindy Lopez: Yeah. It’s so important for parents and caregivers to, as you noted, like research supports, that daily “I love you” message is such an important part of connecting with your child and not just as we’ve already noted, not just about what they do. It’s not like, “Oh, wow, you did a great job in that soccer game today, and you made a mistake. Let’s learn from that.” So in all cases that they know, no matter what happens, that your child feels loved. And you do have an opportunity as parents and caregivers to see their successes and to really lift your child up and help them feel even more successful. So what happens? What can parents say when their child is in that kind of fun space where they’re experiencing some success?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: Yeah, so that’s when parents, again, can be specific. Like, I love seeing how your hard work in this specific area really paid off, like, look at how successful you are. I think this also gives parents the opportunity to prompt some reflection from their children. So, asking, “How do you feel about it?” We, in society, I feel, are often, like, discouraged from saying positive things about ourselves because it might come off as bragging, but part of self-esteem is knowing that you have these positive attributes. So it is really important still for kids to be able to acknowledge, when they’re successful, when they have done something that’s really awesome and this kind of situation or interaction between parent and child is really a very appropriate place for a child to say, or youth, teen, to say something positive about themselves.

Cindy Lopez: Sometimes, you know, kind of the opposite of experiencing that success and those positive feelings, we see our kids, teens, children, even young adults, like, feeling alone and/or isolated because they don't feel like they have any friends or they're just feeling alone. So what can parents, what can caregivers do in that situation?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: So, yes, I think probably the majority of people experience at some point feeling isolated, or excluded, or like they aren't having the kind of friendships or relationships that they're wanting. And so, I mean, this goes back to a lot of the things we've talked about when parents speak with their kids. We want to do our best to be present, to be active listeners.

So we want, again, to, like, be directed towards them, give them our attention, listen without, you know, scrolling on our phones. We want to validate their feelings, like, "Oh, it sounds like things are really rough during recess when you're wanting to play this game and other kids aren't wanting to play with you, you know, I understand why you're feeling lonely when you're at school." We don't want to be dismissive of their feelings or these challenges that, for them, are probably, like, pretty big challenges.

And then we might want to do some, like, shared problem solving, is your child having a hard time connecting with people because they're feeling shy or experiencing social anxiety, right, we can ask questions like, how do you feel when you're in class, like, what are you feeling in your body when it's recess? Is there a lack of shared interests? You know, like the previous example, if this child wants to play a certain thing at recess and other students don't want to play, like, is that something that's getting in the way of them feeling connected with other kids? Are there social skills challenges? Is your child feeling like they're trying to connect, but they aren't being successful? Like, I try to say something, no one responds. There might be supports available at school. A lot of schools have social skills groups or lunch bunches that can help facilitate connections and conversations between students.

So really depending on the outcome of that initial conversation, that can lead to lots more shared problem solving and strategies, for maybe finding shared activities, extracurricular activities, working on social skills or social scripts within the home, and depending on the age of your kids, sometimes parents may even facilitate playdates and help model that appropriate peer interaction. So, there is a lot that families can do to come together and support a child who's experiencing these things. But again, I think the important parts, and it sounds like that podcast on validation would be really great in all of these situations, are listening actively, validating, and like working together to identify possible solutions.

Cindy Lopez: As we're talking, I'm thinking about some of our listeners who might have older kids, teens, young adults. Would some of what you were just saying change? I mean, in terms of how you communicate or what you communicate with them?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: Absolutely. I think the language can always change, and sometimes the messaging changes as well, depending on the individual, but also, yeah, what is appropriate for that age. Usually in middle and high school, parents are not, like, planning social gatherings on behalf of their, you know, preteens or teenagers, but sometimes they might, right? It really depends on the specific teen and what their needs are. But I do think, regardless of the age, asking your child, like, their opinion. So, if maybe we have decided, yes, let's find an extracurricular activity that you would do, and that'll give you an opportunity to meet other people who also participate in that activity. Let's please, parents, find an activity your child wants to participate in.

Cindy Lopez: Yeah.

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: ...Rather than maybe an activity you really enjoyed as a child that you would like your child to participate in. I just find that tends to lead to, like, more genuine connection. And then also more motivation to participate and attend whatever this activity is.

So things like that, again, are relevant to any age. I will also say, like, there are social skills groups that are appropriate for different ages. So even, like, as a teen, I know I was working with an individual who had a desire for friendships, but was having difficulty with those connections. And there was a local Dungeons and Dragons, like, social skills based group. And so for them, that was perfect. Like, that was an interest of theirs, they were able to meet other kids their age who were also interested in that, and developed friendships that lasted beyond that group. So, I think, again, with the language, yes, we want to tailor it to the appropriate age, whether that's their biological age or developmental age, but their input is really important.

Cindy Lopez: I'm thinking about a lot of the students, children, youth that we see at CHC and that you probably see in terms of your clients, they're working through some anxiety, and parents might see that with observing that their child is worried. So how would parents or caregivers respond in that kind of situation when they're sensing that their child's worried about something?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: So yes, we know anxiety is one of the main areas that we treat at CHC because it is such a common challenge that people experience. We want to acknowledge how they're feeling and validate those concerns. So again, whatever the

child is expressing to us as adults may not feel like necessary to worry about. But for them, it is absolutely a real worry. So we want to say like, "That sounds scary. I understand why you're worried, or it makes sense that you're feeling worried about this." So they know there's nothing wrong with how they're feeling, right? Then we want to ask questions. Again, coming from that place of questioning, knowing we don't know everything. "Is this a new worry? Is this something you felt worried about for a long time?" And then we want to ask, like, open ended questions. Like, "What about this situation makes you feel worried? Or how does this make you feel? Can you tell me more about how you're feeling?" Sometimes, like, emotions can be confusing for kids as well, right? Worry compared to, like, feeling scared or stressed. So, allowing them to use whatever words make sense to them to express how they're feeling can be really helpful. And we want to offer some reassurance, like, "I'm here for you. How can I help?" They may not know, right? They might say, like, "I don't know how you can help." You can say, like, "You don't have to handle this all by yourself. We can figure this out together." And sometimes that might mean talking together as parent, caregiver, child, together as a family. Sometimes that might mean, like, "Hey, let's get some extra support. Let's talk to a professional as well who can help us figure out how to manage our worry," but really we want to try and avoid dismissing their worries or saying things like, "Oh, everything will be fine. Or you shouldn't feel worried about that. There's nothing to be scared of. Only little kids get scared of the dark." Things like that aren't going to be helpful to your child in the moment most likely, but may make them feel like something is wrong with them that they are feeling that way, and that is something we don't want them to experience. Everyone experiences some kind of worries at some point. So we really want to try and be supportive and understanding and again if your child is worried the majority of the time, if it's interfering with their ability to function, that's really when we would encourage people to, like, speak with a professional, a mental health professional, about things that can be done to help your child manage their anxiety so they can have a better quality of life.

Cindy Lopez: As you're talking, Ariela, I'm also thinking about some kids, and you alluded to this, don't really know how they feel or they can't put a word to how they feel. Is it okay for parents to suggest some words to them? I'm also reminded of the emotions wheel that has all the different feelings on it and different ways you can say, I'm mad or different ways you can say, I'm scared, right? So, just wondering what you think about that – is it okay for parents to suggest or caregivers to suggest, like, are you feeling this, XYZ?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: I think it's okay, but I think it, again, depends on your child's level of understanding. Sometimes, if it's a younger child, or even an older child who may, again, just have some difficulty distinguishing emotions, it might not help to give

them words. It might help to provide, like, a visual. And these are things that can be found online pretty easily where you might be able to show them, here's a chart of, like, 20 different faces, which face is making an expression that you think reflects how you're feeling? So I know like visuals are something I will often use with children and again, sometimes teens depending on their preference or needs, that can help them sometimes a bit more than words. But if it would be appropriate, if your kid's kind of like, I don't know how I feel, and you're like, okay, are you feeling worried, mad, frustrated, right, like, you can offer suggestions. We won't necessarily know then if that's an accurate reflection of how your child's feeling, right? Or if they're like, that's close enough, but sometimes if you can't come up with, like, any words to express, suggestions can be really helpful.

Cindy Lopez: It's interesting because we've talked about lots of different situations, lots of different ways to connect with your kids as a parent or caregiver, and things that you could say to them in different kinds of situations, like if they're feeling lonely. If they've just had this great success. If they experience a setback, made a mistake. Well, what if parents or some of our listeners are hearing today and they're like, okay, I'm not really like seeing any of those things in my child right now. What would you say to those parents and caregivers? Like none of these things are coming up. How do you connect with your child?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: So, I would say, first of all, I'm glad that these challenges aren't coming up. I still think it's important to connect with your child daily and again through some kind of specific question. "How was that assignment that you were working on last night? How did it go when you had to turn it in today in class?" right, so you're getting more than just "Fine." (Although I guess they could respond "ine to that specific situation.)

You also want to let your child know you love them. So even if that connection is, "I love you." Sometimes asking a structured, "What was the high and low of your day, the peak or valley, rose or thorn?" Lots of different language that could be used. So again, having them reflect and share a positive and maybe something that wasn't so positive about their day. If something happened and you're feeling proud of them, taking an opportunity to share that with them, "I'm proud of you." You weren't in the best place this morning, right? We were running late, you made it to school, you had a great day. I'm proud of you." "I'm thankful for you."

Cindy Lopez: Hmm.

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: So, sharing if there are no challenges to work through, again, that's a positive thing for the time being, but still sharing something positive with them and giving them that positive feedback.

Cindy Lopez: Yeah. I just think it's so important for us to connect with our kids every day in some way. And you just noted a few ways to do that, like, "I love you. I'm proud of you. I'm thankful for you." I think parents, in most cases, like, "I love you" seems to be part of their language. "I'm proud of you" seems to be part of the language. I really like what you just said about "I'm thankful for you." I don't know how often kids really hear those kinds of things. So to our listeners, I just hope that you're able to take away today, at least one or two things, that you can say to your child and connect with your child in a way that's meaningful to them.

So Ariela, is there anything else in addition, like you want to make sure that our listeners hear from you today?

Ariela Laibson, LCSW: Well, thank you so much, Cindy, for having me. And I just really want to reiterate that communicating openly with children is really important. It helps kids develop healthy self-esteem, sets them up for successful relationships in the future where they can also openly communicate. Nobody says the right thing all the time, not even therapists. So actively listening, communicating openly, validating feelings, all of these things are tangible steps that people can take and that really go a long way. So thank you again.

Cindy Lopez: Thank you, Ariela. And to our listeners, thank you as well. If you are in a situation where you're concerned about your child, you're seeing a lot of anxiety, persistent worry, loneliness that's coming out in different ways, please reach out to us. We are here to help. You can reach out to our care team of which Ariela is a part, you might even talk to her one day. But you can reach out to us, email careteam@chconline.org or call us at 650-688-3625. So again, thank you all for joining us. And we hope you're having a great day.