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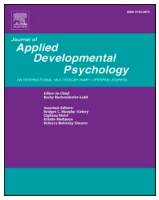

# Let's Connect®: An emotion-focused parenting program☆

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ABSTRACT

For decades, clinical research has focused on developing and refining effective parenting interventions through promoting positive parenting practices. Many of these interventions, grounded in behavioral theories, highlight the importance of helping parents create predictable routines for children, attend to children's positive behavior, support positive parent-child interactions, and use contingency management strategies. Key to the success of any parenting intervention is the ability of parents to regulate their own emotions and incorporate emotion socialization practices such as emotion labeling, support, and coaching. There has been considerable interest in developing parenting interventions with a specific focus on parent emotion regulation and emotion socialization practices. This paper introduces an emotion-focused parenting program called Let's Connect® that translates what we know about emotional development, emotion socialization, and parenting into an innovative approach to working directly with families in ways that build supportive parent-child relationships as well as parent/child SEC, mental/behavioral health, and overall resilience.

Decades of clinical research have focused on the development of effective parenting interventions that are grounded in behavioral theories and highlight the importance of predictability, attending to positive behavior, increasing positive parent-child interaction, and contingency management. Considerable research demonstrates that these interventions reduce harsh, coercive parenting, increase positivity in parent-child interaction, and reduce child behavior problems (Eyberg, Nelson, & Boggs, 2008; McMahon, Long, & Forehand, 2011; Webster-Stratton, Jamila Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008). Nonetheless, there is growing awareness that behaviorally focused parenting interventions leave key gaps in the promotion of parents' social emotional competencies and positive parenting practices that build children's social and emotional competencies (SEC), parent-child connection, and overall child mental/behavioral health. This shift in focus is driven by research on emotional development and familial emotion socialization which emphasizes the importance of parental responses to children's emotions as critical to children's healthy development and overall well-being (Shipman et al., 2007; Baker, Fenning, & Crnic, 2011; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Gee & Cohodes, 2023; Katz, Maliken, & Stettler, 2012; McElwain, Halberstadt, & Volling, 2007; Morris, Criss, Silk, & Houltberg, 2017). A meta-analysis of parenting interventions showed that the largest effect sizes were found for treatment programs that included emotion communication skills training (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008). Research also demonstrates important links between parents' own emotion awareness and regulation, their supportive emotion socialization practices, and positive child outcomes (Campbell, Thoburn, & Leonard, 2017; Dunsmore, Booker, & Ollendick, 2013; Lippold, Duncan, Coatsworth, Nix, & Greenberg, 2015; Rutherford, Wallace, Laurent, & Mayes, 2015). There has been recent interest in integrating emotion socialization and parent's own emotion-related skills and mindfulness into parenting interventions (Booker, Ollendick, Dunsmore, & Greene, 2016; Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009; Havighurst, Wilson, Harley, Prior, & Kehoe, 2010; Katz et al., 2014; Sanders, Turner, & Metzler, 2019). Supportive parent-child relationships and SEC are among the most important adaptive systems to target to promote healthy outcomes in all youth and to increase resilience in youth exposed to trauma and adversity (Masten, 2015; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). Considerable research documents that warm, attuned parenting and caregiver and youth SEC are associated with a host of desirable family and child outcomes, even in the face of poverty and serious adversity (Kirby, 2020). Additionally, prevention efforts that build youth SEC have demonstrated cost-effectiveness, with a 11:1 return on investment (Belfield et al., 2015). This paper introduces an emotion-focused parenting program called Let's Connect® (LC) that

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translates what we know about emotional development, emotion socialization, and parenting into an innovative approach to working directly with families in ways that build supportive parent-child relationships as well as parent-child communication, parent/child SEC, mental/behavioral health, and overall resilience.

## What is Let's Connect® (LC, letsconnect.org)?

LC is a trauma-responsive parenting skills program developed by Drs. Kimberly Shipman, Monica Fitzgerald, and Lucianne Hackbert for primary caregivers and their children and adolescents (3-17 years). LC supports parents in building their own SEC and well-being while developing behaviorally specific, emotion-focused parenting skills and strategies. We use the term parent to refer to any caregiver who has a significant caregiving role with the child. We use the term child to refer to youth in early and middle childhood through adolescence. LC builds parents' skills in three core areas: (1) parents' own emotional awareness, acceptance, and regulation, (2) intentional family environments, and (3) emotion-focused, relationship skills. Parents also gain knowledge about resilience, social emotional development, and family emotional climate and learn to use LC skills for talking with children in healthy ways about topics ranging from everyday situations to difficult family topics, including trauma, violence, transitions, and loss. LC parenting skills are taught through a combination of self-reflection, direct discussion, video examples, behavioral rehearsal, live-coaching of parent-child interactions, and structured home practice. Live coaching is a critical component of skill-building in LC and aligns with research showing that parents receiving responsive, live coaching and feedback during skills-focused parenting interventions (versus no coaching) demonstrated greater acquisition of skills and better engagement in services (Barnett et al., 2017; Caron, Bernard, & Dozier, 2018; Shanley & Niec, 2010). In LC, children actively participate in live-coaching of parent skills during parent-child interaction.

As part of training and supervision, LC facilitators are supported to model and embody LC skills (e.g., self-awareness, notice/appreciate, listening, validation), use a strengths-based approach, and engage in collaborative goal setting with families. LC facilitators partner with caregivers to learn about how their cultural beliefs, contexts, and experiences shape their parenting and perspectives about children's feelings and behaviors. These conversations are collaborative, nonjudgmental, and integrated throughout the intervention to support cultural relevance for each family (Buxbaum, 2023; McCabe, Yeh, & Zerr, 2020; Rodríguez & Smith, 2020; Sue, Neville, Sue, & Smith, 2022). For example, facilitators ask caregivers about experiences with emotion in their families of origin (i.e. when they were growing up) and cultural themes that are relevant to their parenting or family experiences. Often, families respond with examples that highlight both family-specific and cultural beliefs about emotions and roles within the family. Many also discuss how immigration experiences and/or raising children in a country different than the one in which they were raised may impact their parenting. Facilitators also inquire about meaningful or connecting rituals that caregivers share with their children. Many times, rituals reflect important cultural practices (e.g. celebrating ancestors, rites of passage, community gathering, acknowledging loss) and simultaneously strengthen connections within the family. Facilitators are intentional about how they connect families' lived experiences and examples with LC skills and strategies to support relevance and respect for cultural values.

LC is available in individual and group formats (12 to 16 sessions) and has been used with many families, including monolingual Spanish-speaking families and families involved in child welfare. LC has well-established implementation manuals and parent materials (e.g., handouts, video examples, activities, skills prompt sheets, homework) for each format in both English and Spanish, including companion fidelity tools (i.e., self-report checklist for facilitators, observation report for supervisors) (Shipman, Fitzgerald, Pauletic, Gorrono, & Hackbert, 2020). Pilot studies with diverse, at-risk families have demonstrated significant increases in parent emotion regulation, parent emotion support and validation of the child, and child self-regulation and reductions in parenting stress and child behavior problems, with gains maintained at 3-month follow-up (https://www.nctsn.org/interventions/lets-connect; Shaffer, Fitzgerald, Shipman, & Torres, 2019). Findings from a recent clinical trial of the individual format of LC with families exposed to domestic violence and other adverse life events show that families receiving LC, as compared to a control group, demonstrate greater improvements in parenting stress and the quality of the parent-child relationship as well as in children's emotional competencies, internalizing difficulties (anxiety, depression), behavioral challenges, and trauma symptoms (see Shipman, Pauletic, & Fitzgerald paper in this special issue). LC currently is being implemented in various sites across the United States as well as internationally. LC has been designated as a Promising Practice by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (https://www.nctsn.org/interventions/lets-connect) and promising strategy for early care and education (Bartlett, Smith, & Bringewatt, 2017).

## Theoretical foundation for Let's Connect®

### *Emotion and social emotional competencies (SEC)*

The functionalist theory of emotion (Barrett, 2012; Barrett & Campos, 1987; Saarni, Campos, Camras, & Witherington, 2006) provides a framework for understanding the importance of emotion and the role that parent-child interaction plays in children's development of social emotional competence (SEC). Within this context, emotion has been defined as "bi-directional processes of establishing, maintaining, and/or disrupting significant relationships between a person and the external or internal environment" (Barrett & Campos, 1987, p. 558). This definition suggests that emotions play a functional role in helping children achieve key intrapersonal (individual well-being) and interpersonal (maintenance of important relationships, obtaining parental support and assistance) goals and facilitate adaptation to their social environment. Emotions motivate the child's behavior toward their goals *and* the child's emotional expression motivates the behavior of caregivers and others in goal-relevant ways. For example, a child's cries or other displays of distress typically will prompt a caregiver to respond to meet the needs of the child and help them to co-regulate. Although there are several different theories of emotion and emotional development, most of these theories highlight the functional role that emotion plays in guiding goal-directed behavior, social relationships, and overall adaptation to our environment (Holodynski & Friedlmeier, 2005; Izard, 2009; Thompson, 1994). The most updated theory of constructed emotion (Barrett, 2012) emphasizes the importance of sociocultural context in the perception and experience of emotion, with attention to the idea that emotions exist across generations and cultures because they serve important functions for self, others, and the larger community.

As children grow, they develop SEC that best support their ability to manage emotion in adaptive ways within their social context and build and maintain connection to important others in their life, while becoming increasingly independent. SEC include the ability to recognize, label, and interpret emotion, modulate emotional expression and arousal, and understand and support emotional arousal in self and others, including perspective-taking, empathy, and compassion (Campos, Camras, Lee, He, & Campos, 2018; Chodron, 2000; Saarni et al., 2006). These SEC give individuals the tools needed to respond strategically to emotionally arousing situations, support goal attainment and healthy relationships, and facilitate adaptation to their social environment (Shipman, Schneider, & Brown, 2004; Barrett, 2012; Denham, 2018). SEC also promote mental, behavioral, and physical health as well as cognitive, academic, and occupational success throughout the lifespan (Baker et al., 2011; Eisenberg et al., 1998; Katz et al., 2012; McElwain et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2017; von Salisch,

2018).

*Emotion socialization*

Although children learn about emotions across various contexts throughout childhood, parent emotion socialization practices are a primary influence in children's emotional development (Hastings, 2018; Katz et al., 2012; Rutherford et al., 2015). Adaptive parent emotion socialization practices include: (a) creating warm, supportive family environments, (b) providing developmentally appropriate structure and emotional demands, (c) modeling adaptive emotional expression and regulation consistent with cultural norms and values, (d) providing attuned responses to child displays of emotion and behavior, and (e) providing direct teaching about emotion and scaffolding of children's SEC (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Hastings, 2018; Saarni et al., 2006; Sanders et al., 2019). A parent skilled in these practices can respond to children's emotion and behavior by modeling emotional awareness and regulation skills, conveying openness to learning about their child's emotional experiences, validating those experiences, and scaffolding their child's social emotional skills. Adaptive emotion socialization practices are cornerstone to promoting supportive parent-child relationships and predict children's SEC (Shipman et al., 2007; Baker et al., 2011; Shaffer, Suveg, Thomassin, & Bradbury, 2012), behavioral compliance (Havighurst et al., 2010; Shortt, Stoolmiller, Smith-Shine, Mark Eddy, & Sheeber, 2010), mental health (Katz & Hunter, 2007) and youth and family resilience (Shaffer et al., 2019). Parents can also engage in unhelpful or maladaptive emotion socialization practices that undermine, minimize, or invalidate children's emotional experience and expression (Shaffer et al., 2019). Parents' own SEC and beliefs about emotion greatly impact their emotional socialization practices with their children (Cunningham, Kliewer, & Garner, 2009; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Morris et al., 2017; Rutherford et al., 2015). Family-of-origin experiences and cultural context play a significant role in the parent's development of emotion socialization practices.

## Emotion socialization in action: Empirical foundation for Let's Connect®

*Parents' emotional awareness, acceptance, and regulation*

Adults who have greater awareness and acceptance of their own emotions are better able to regulate emotion in healthy ways (Füstös, Gramann, Herbert, & Pollatos, 2013) and experience less anxiety and depression (Saxena, Dubey, & Pandey, 2011), fewer health challenges (Saxena et al., 2011), and lower levels of stress (Hua et al., 2014). Further, adaptive emotion regulation has been shown to mediate the relations between exposure to adverse life events and health outcomes (Cloitre et al., 2019). Emotional awareness and acceptance also promote perspective-taking, empathy, and compassion for self and others (Austin, Drossaert, & Bohlmeijer, 2023; Banzhaf et al., 2018; MacDonald & Price, 2017). These skills also have important implications for effective parenting and emotion socialization (Buckholdt, Parra, & Jobe-Shields, 2014; Cunningham et al., 2009; Shaffer et al., 2019). Parents who are aware of their own emotions and can distinguish their automatic default reactions from intentional parenting responses are better at providing consistent and predictable caregiving to their children (Duncan et al., 2009). Parents who regulate their own emotions effectively can model and coach healthy emotion regulation for their children and are more likely to choose parenting responses that convey empathy and strengthen emotional security, secure attachment, and overall resilience (Havighurst et al., 2010; Morelen, Shaffer, & Suveg, 2016; Shaffer & Obradović, 2017). Additionally, these practices buffer children from the many negative outcomes associated with trauma exposure by strengthening the parent-child relationship, building youth SEC, and promoting overall mental and behavioral health (Gee & Cohodes, 2023; Groves, 2018; Katz, Stettler, & Gurtovenko, 2016; Masten, 2015; Masten, 2021; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020).

In contrast, patterns of emotion dysregulation (e.g., inability to identify emotions, blunted affect, emotional lability) increase parents' risk for psychopathology (Berking & Wupperman, 2012; D'Agostino, Covanti, Monti, & Starcevic, 2016), interpersonal difficulties (Kim, Pears, Capaldi, & Owen, 2009), and parenting challenges (Buckholdt et al., 2014; Sanders et al., 2019). Parents who struggle to regulate their emotions often experience challenges in scaffolding their children's self-regulation, use more reactive disciplinary approaches, and are at increased risk for child abuse (Bridgett, Burt, Edwards, & Deater-Deckard, 2015; Lorber, 2012; Lowell & Renk, 2017). Parents with higher levels of emotion dysregulation are also more likely to invalidate their adolescents' emotional expression and this invalidation mediates the relation between parent and youth emotion dysregulation (Buckholdt et al., 2014). These processes may, in large part, explain intergenerational transmission of self-regulation difficulties (Buckholdt et al., 2014). These findings point to the critical importance of building adult SEC as a key part of any parenting intervention.

LC builds caregivers' emotional awareness, acceptance, and regulation by teaching simple but powerful strategies that include labeling emotion, breathing and mindfulness activities, and a short compassion practice for themselves and for their child. Several of the strategies used are grounded in traditional contemplative practices that promote emotional awareness, emotional acceptance, being present in the moment, and compassion for self and others. Similar to theories of emotional development, contemplative traditions place importance on accepting all emotions and emphasize that emotions provide us with important information about the present moment. A primary LC strategy is the "Hand-to-Heart" Three Step process that is presented with a set of verbal, visual, and physical cues:

- **Step 1- 'Tune In'** encourages caregivers to pause to tune into their own emotions and needs, with a focus on self-nurturance, compassion, and nonjudgement. Parents are prompted to ask, *"How am I feeling?"* and *"What do I need?"*, and they are reminded, *"This is a gesture of self-care, nurturance, and compassion."* This step is accompanied by a "hand to heart" gesture.
- **Step 2- 'Reach Out'** builds caregiver's awareness of the child's emotions and needs and encourages openness to learning about the child's feelings, perspective, and experience. Parents are prompted to ask themselves *"How might my child be feeling? What is their experience, perspective? What do they need?."* This step is accompanied by a gesture of the hands-reaching-out.
- **Step 3- 'Connect'** focuses on strengthening the parent-child relationship and accessing caregiver and child resources that support the connection as well as resources that support individual needs. Parents are prompted to reflect/breathe into on how their body feels when in connection with their child and to ask, *"How can I continue to build my connection with my child?" "What resources can I tap into to meet my needs and my child's needs?"* Resources can be external support but can also be something internal (e.g., presence, humor, nonjudgement). This step is accompanied by a gesture of placing the hands together.

The Hand-to-Heart Three Step process is grounded in research that shows that tuning into our emotion and internal experience promotes emotion regulation and empathy (Lieberman et al., 2007; Shah, Catmur, & Bird, 2017) and that gentle touch (e.g. the hand to heart gesture) reduces physiological reactivity, activates oxytocin associated with human bonding, and activates brain networks associated with emotional awareness and compassion (Keltner, 2010; Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Emerging research also demonstrates the benefits of practicing compassion for self and others such as increasing emotional awareness (Singer & Klimecki, 2014), psychological well-being (Shonin, Van Gordon, Compare, Zangeneh, & Griffiths, 2015), optimism (Dolcos, Hu, Iordan, Moore, & Dolcos, 2016), prosocial behavior (Condon, 2017,

2019), insight (Lucantonio et al., 2014) and adaptive physiological and behavioral response to stress and anxiety reduction (Jazaieri et al., 2014; Pace et al., 2009). In addition to being an important practice, the Hand-to-Heart Three Step Process also provides an overall framework for LC that emphasizes the importance of caregivers' focus on supporting themselves first in order to build capacity to respond to their own emotions and needs as well as build attunement and connection with their child, effective parenting skills, and healthy parent-child relationships.

*Intentional family environments*

Creating an intentional family environment involves setting up routines, rituals and daily rhythms for children and the family that support predictability, create opportunities for warmth and connection, and support child and parent emotion regulation (Fiese et al., 2002; Shaffer et al., 2019). Routines are consistent ways of approaching daily activities and/or transitions (e.g., mealtime, bedtime, getting ready for school). Rituals are activities that have a strong emotional component and serve to increase connection, warmth, belonging, and/or mark transitions, change, celebration, and/or loss (e.g., bedtime stories, meal blessings, honoring loved ones). Rhythm involves structuring daily experiences in ways that balance family rest and activity, work and play, and social and independent time throughout the day. Consistent day-to-day interactions with parents promote greater predictability in children's home life, resulting in reduced stress and less family conflict over time (Dubas & Gerris, 2002) and protection in the face of adversity (Gee & Cohodes, 2023). Family routines and rituals predict child adjustment, regulation, health, and sense of belonging as well as parenting competence and marital satisfaction (Fiese et al., 2002). Parents also support children and increase predictability by creating and communicating clear rules and expectations which promote children's healthy emotion regulation, encourage children to internalize shared values, and reduce behavioral noncompliance (Duncombe, Havighurst, Holland, & Frankling, 2012). These combined strategies create family environments characterized by supportive parent-child relationships and warm, supportive emotional climates which are trauma-responsive and resilience-promoting, especially in the face of significant adversity (Gee & Cohodes, 2023; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). These strategies predict children's ability to cope and regulate emotion in adaptive ways as well as their overall adjustment, health, and sense of belonging (Fiese et al., 2002). In contrast, high levels of unpredictability and/or chaotic environments negatively impact the quality of parenting (e.g., parental responsiveness and acceptance, intrusiveness; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2016; Zvara et al., 2020) in ways that are associated with negative psychosocial outcomes in youth (e.g., difficulty with executive functioning, behavioral dysregulation, emotional distress; Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2016). One study found that that unpredictability within the home, in part, mediates the negative impact of poverty on youth social and emotional adjustment (Evans et al., 2005). Additionally, unpredictability in the home can lead to a magnified stress response in youth that is associated with short- and long-term mental, behavioral, and physical health challenges (Manczak, Leigh, Chin, & Chen, 2018).

LC introduces the concept of intentional family environments by discussing with parents how routines, rituals, and daily rhythms promote predictability, consistency, warmth, and opportunities for connection within the family. For example, LC asks caregivers how routine, ritual, and rhythm supported a recent moment of connection and how they could be incorporated to create ease in moments of challenge. LC encourages families to begin by making small changes that resonate most for them and to expand gradually over time. Caregivers try out their new strategy, share how it went next session, and the facilitator and caregiver collaborate to make refinements. The focus is on how the new strategy supports connection, eases transition, reduces stress and challenging behaviors, and builds a sense of mastery. These skills provide an important foundation that supports parent's use of the emotion-focused relationship skills described below.

*Emotion-focused relationship skills*

Emotion-focused relationship skills are behaviorally specific skills that increase warmth, connection, and emotional support within the parent-child relationship, promote healthy attachment, emotional security, and emotion communication, and build youth SEC. Emotion-focused relationship skills also give parents communication strategies to talk with children about challenges and difficult topics in ways that increase the likelihood youth will seek support from them (Brown, Fitzgerald, Shipman, & Schneider, 2007). Research in this area identifies three main categories of emotion-focused relationship skills: (a) attending and active listening skills, (b) emotion support skills, and (c) emotion coaching skills. When parents attend to youth (e.g., describe what they are doing, reflect what they say) and actively listen, they convey that they are present, value their child and are interested in understanding their feelings, perspective, and experience. Attending and active listening skills have an added benefit of eliciting positive emotions for parents (Kawamichi et al., 2015). These skills promote positive interactions, facilitate effective communication, and are associated with increased efficacy of parenting interventions (Kaminski et al., 2008). These skills are also cornerstone to most behavioral approaches which emphasize how attending skills increase positive behavior and positivity in the parent-child relationship (Eyberg et al., 2008; McMahon et al., 2011; Webster-Stratton et al., 2008). Emotion support skills (e.g., validation; normalizing; showing empathy and/or compassion) communicate acceptance and understanding of the child's emotional experience and let children know that their emotions are normal, understandable, and play an important role in their lives. Emotion coaching skills provide direct scaffolding to support children's development of emotion awareness and labeling, emotional understanding (e.g., understanding of mixed emotions and secondary emotions), coping, and problem-solving skills. Emotion support and emotion coaching skills directly relate to children's mental/behavioral health, physical health, and social, emotional, and academic competence in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies in both typically developing and high-risk samples (Cunningham et al., 2009; Johnson, Hawes, Eisenberg, Kohlhoff, & Dudeney, 2017; Suveg, Zeman, Flannery-Schroeder, & Cassano, 2005; Yap, Allen, & Ladouceur, 2008). Emotion support and coaching skills also predict children's emotion regulation (Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2014), satisfaction with their parental relationship (Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2014), comfort sharing emotionally arousing topics with parents (Shipman & Zeman, 2001), and greater help-seeking from parents when faced with difficult life events (Brown et al., 2007). Additionally, these aspects of emotion-focused parenting predict children's development of executive functioning skills (De Cock et al., 2017; Sosic-Vasic et al., 2017; Towe-Goodman et al., 2014). Emotion-focused relationship skills also include learning to avoid invalidating children's emotions in ways that undermine the parent-child relationship and interfere with children's development of SEC (Shaffer et al., 2019). Parent invalidation creates risk for children engaging in maladaptive emotion management strategies (e.g., emotion inhibition, dysregulation; Shipman et al., 2007; Buckholdt et al., 2014; Krause, Mendelson, & Lynch, 2003), lower levels of emotional security in the parent-child relationship (Jobe-Shields, Williams, & Hardt, 2017), and child psychopathology (e.g., psychological distress, anxiety, depression, self-harm; Adrian et al., 2018; Krause et al., 2003; Yap et al., 2008).

LC teaches parents behaviorally specific, emotion-focused relationship skills for interacting and communicating with their children. These skills include *Connection Skills, Emotion Support Skills*, and *Emotion Coaching Skills*. *Connection Skills* are taught first and help caregivers to build positivity into daily interactions, show genuine interest in their children, and gain understanding about their children's emotional experiences and perspectives. These skills are key to building warmth,

positivity, and connection in a relationship. LC *Connection Skills* include:

- "Noticing and appreciating" include verbalizations and actions that convey positive attention and appreciation of a child's prosocial behaviors, their unique qualities and experiences, interests, and passions. This can be as simple as noticing how much they enjoy an activity, describing what they are doing (*"Wow, you are building a two-story house"; "You are so focused on solving that math problem."*), appreciating their kindness, or giving them a smile from across the room to convey *'I see you'* and *'You are important to me'*.
- "Listening to learn more" includes positive interested body language, reflecting and summarizing what the child says, asking open-ended questions that focus on understanding the child's experience, and going slowly to give the child time to respond.
- "Focus on Feelings" includes labeling the child's (and others') emotions, recognizing and labeling mixed emotions, identifying feeling intensity, and helping children to identify internal cues of feelings in their body. These skills form the foundation for more advanced *Emotion Coaching Skills* that are taught later in the program.

LC also teaches caregivers to avoid common traps that interfere with connection, including distraction, focusing on situational details rather than the child's emotion and/or experience, asking unhelpful questions (e.g., closed-ended, focused on situational details rather than experience), and attending primarily to disruptive behavior. Caregivers are taught how to "circle back" when they fall into traps and, more generally, how to use the emotion-focused relationship skills to circle back to support a restorative process when difficult interactions do occur.

*Emotion Support Skills* include any behavior that validates a child's emotional experience and communicates support and acceptance. Emotion support skills convey comfort with children's emotional expression and send children the message that their emotions are natural, acceptable, and a valuable source of information. These caregiver skills promote warmth and positivity in the relationship, demonstrate kindness and compassion, and support youth development of SEC. LC emphasizes that caregivers can validate children's emotions while still setting limits on disruptive or inappropriate behavior. LC *Emotion Support Skills* include:

- *Normalizing* or communicating to the child that their emotional experiences make sense or are shared by others in similar situations (e.g., *"It makes sense that you would feel mad. I bet that would make other kids mad too."*).
- Showing *empathy* and *compassion* by demonstrating an understanding of the child's perspective and shared emotional experience as well as a desire to support and ease emotional distress and enhance well-being.
- *Demonstrating care and kindness* through verbal or nonverbal behaviors (e.g., hug, supportive smile) that demonstrate support and acceptance in response to children's emotional displays.

LC also teaches caregivers to avoid common emotion-support traps, reducing invalidating responses such as minimization, judgment, criticism, jumping to problem-solving, lecturing, silver lining (dismissing feeling or experience and pointing out the positive) and hanging out to dry (not responding to an important emotional disclosure or changing the subject).

*Emotion Coaching Skills* include strategies for increasing children's understanding of emotion in self and others, supporting emotion regulation, and building coping and problem-solving skills. Emotion coaching skills give caregivers tools for building youth emotional awareness, acceptance, and regulation as well as coping and problem-solving. LC *Emotion Coaching Skills* include:

- *Building emotion knowledge* includes labeling feelings that children experience but may not yet know how to label, labeling feelings of others and/or characters in movies and books, and helping children to identify internal states and cues in their body.
- *Identifying feelings in context* helps children to identify the causes of their feelings and, without judgment, to explore what happened as a result of their feeling and/or emotional expression.
- *Recognizing and labeling mixed emotions* helps children to identify mixed emotions, understand primary and secondary emotions (e.g., identifying that underneath anger may be sadness or disappointment) and to understand that we often experience more than one emotion at a time.
- *Coping skills* support children's emotion regulation by helping them to down-regulate emotion and promote a sense of calm (e.g., breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, seeking support, picturing a safe space) and/or to up-regulate emotion (e.g., cardio/movement, music, exercise to get in your body) to increase energy, attention, or engagement as the situation demands. Caregivers help children to identify effective coping strategies, practice these strategies when not experiencing emotional distress, and to try out these strategies when in stressful situations with caregiver support.
- *Problem-Solving skills* include steps to help caregivers to scaffold children's ability to generate and try out solutions and to adjust and refine them based on the outcome.

Caregivers are encouraged to use *Connection and Emotion Support Skills* before engaging in coping and problem-solving. Once children feel heard and understood, they are often better able to generate coping and problem-solving strategies independently if needed.

We present a model of LC components and their anticipated impact on parent, child, and family outcomes (Fig. 1) that is grounded in theoretical and empirical research described throughout this paper.

## How Let's Connect® skills are taught

LC begins by providing parents with foundational information about resilience, social and emotional development, family emotional climate, children's behavioral challenges, and other topics specific to each family, including child trauma. LC builds caregiver insight and knowledge about the function of emotions and behaviors, the role of caregivers in scaffolding children's SEC, and the importance of talking with children openly about emotion in everyday life situations, including stressful family situations that parents often report difficulty addressing (Braun, 2008). Caregivers engage in guided reflection on how their own emotional experience and default responses may interfere with skillful parenting, especially in times of stress or when responding to a challenging child behavior. Caregivers reflect on the emotional environment of their current family and family of origin and consider what they would like to keep the same and/or change. Caregivers are also taught how to identify emotional needs that may underlie behavioral challenges and how to use the core LC skills (Hand-to-Heart, intentional family environment, emotion-focused relationships skills) to prevent and ameliorate these challenges throughout the program.

The LC approach to skill building is highly interactive, based on adult learning theories and parenting intervention research indicating that behavioral change and skill development are enhanced by active learning strategies (Beidas & Kendall, 2010; Kaminski et al., 2008). All skills are taught through a combination of didactics, discussion, video-demonstration, self-reflection, in-session guided practice with caregiver and child and daily home practice. LC skills are taught sequentially, beginning with caregiver's own social and emotional skills followed by intentional family environments and emotion-focused relationship skills. LC uses the image of a house to show how each of the emotion-focused parenting skills build on one another and to have an easy graphical representation or metaphor to teach, reinforce, and prompt the skills. *Intentional family environments* and *Connection skills* are

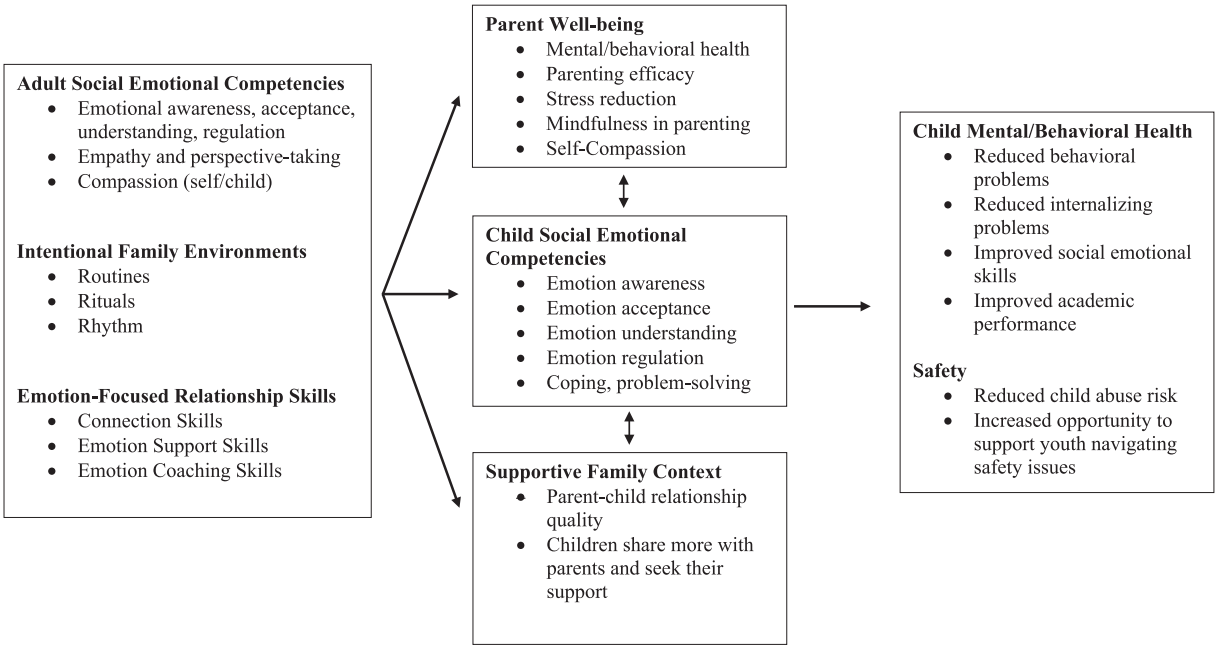


**Fig. 1.** Let's Connect®: an emotion-focused parenting model.

taught first, forming the foundation of the house and are followed by Emotion Support (walls of the house) and Emotion Coaching skills (roof of the house). Caregivers move to the next set of skills once they have developed proficiency with the previous skill set. Ongoing coaching, support, and home practice opportunities help caregivers to generalize skill use throughout daily interactions with their child. Although the skills taught are the same for all children/youth, the approach to skills practice, coaching and use is adapted for children at different developmental levels. For example, young children will often enjoy a parent who describes what they are doing and reflects what they are saying thoughout an activity. In contrast, an adolescent may be comfortable with only a simple statement that notices/appreciates them. Additionally, young children will usually be very open to interacting with a parent at a daily scheduled time in which the parent practices using these skills. For older children and adolescents, parents often practice by taking advantage of naturally occurring, everyday interactions (e.g., when driving in the car, at the dinner table).

In-session guided practice includes live or in-vivo facilitator coaching of parent-child interaction as well as debriefing with both the parent and child. The facilitator and caregiver agree on the most optimal coaching approach (e.g., verbal, visual prompts) to support the caregiver when practicing skills with the child. The parent debrief focuses on comfort, confidence and proficiency using skills as well as noticing how the emotion-focused relationship skills used by the parent may have impacted the child, supported the caregiver-child connection and/or increased the parent's understanding of the child's emotional experience and perspective. The parent also reflects on any traps they fell into and how that affected the interaction to build insight and preventive awareness for the next interaction. The child debrief focuses on learning about the child's experience during the interaction and how it felt for them (what was helpful, not helpful). Throughout LC, the LC provider models all the LC skills in their interactions with parents. They listen with genuine interest to understand the parent's perspective and world view, they notice and appreciate the parent for who they are, and they provide ongoing emotion support, validation, and emotion coaching to the parent. This process is foundational to LC and promotes supportive emotional climate as well as the openness to understanding and working within parents' world views in a way that supports cultural responsiveness, trust, and engagement. Many parents report that this process is what makes LC unique and allows them to feel safe trying new skills, demonstrating vulnerability, and beginning to shift sometimes entrenched family patterns.

### Let's Connect® as trauma-responsive and resilience-promoting

Children and youth exposed to trauma have experienced challenges that often undermine their sense of safety, emotional security, and sense of self, increase physiological reactivity and stress, and create significant risk for challenges with regard to mental/behavioral health, physical health, and academic achievement (Davies, Martin, & Cummings, 2018; McLaughlin, Colich, Rodman, & Weissman, 2020). Trauma-exposure can also compromise the development of children's SEC (Shipman et al., 2007; Gruhn & Compas, 2020) in ways that make it more difficult for them to connect with others and adapt across a variety of interpersonal contexts (Shipman et al., 2007; Heleniak, Jenness, Vander Stoep, McCauley, & McLaughlin, 2016; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010). Youth who have experienced child maltreatment have often learned emotion-related skills that help them to adapt within the maltreating environment but, at the same time, interfere with healthy social and emotional development and connection to others (Shipman, Zeman, Penza, & Champion, 2000; Davies & Martin, 2013; Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002). LC promotes the very protective factors that are key to resilience (e.g., supportive parent-child relationships, SEC) and buffer youth from the impact of trauma while also reducing risk factors (e.g., mental/behavioral health challenges, academic challenges) (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). Additionally, caregivers often need support to develop their own SEC given the stress and unique challenges of parenting a trauma-exposed child, especially when they have had their own experiences with trauma and/or emotion dysregulation. LC supports caregivers in building SEC that support their own mindfulness and well-being while giving them the tools needed to model effective emotion skills and to respond to children in a way that promotes warmth, connection, and trust. Additionally, LC includes "circle back" restorative repair processes that help caregivers gain skills to address difficult interactions that occur, show empathy and compassion, address impact, and restore trust. Often children growing up in maltreating environments have not experienced these types of restorative healing interactions following conflict or harm. LC also supports caregivers of trauma-exposed youth by providing education about resilience and trauma, helping caregivers to address the emotional needs that may be

underlying difficult behaviors, using LC skills to prevent and/or ameliorate behavioral challenges, and empowering parents regarding the powerful role that they play in supporting children's healthy social emotional development and overall resilience. While LC is highly relevant for youth who have significant exposure to trauma, it is also powerful as a universal prevention program that builds key protective factors that are important for all children (Shipman, Schneider, & Brown, 2004; Gee & Cohodes, 2023; Wu et al., 2022). Children who have the opportunity to build these protective factors early in life will be better prepared to navigate stressful experiences throughout their lives in adaptive ways (Gee & Cohodes, 2023).

## Summary and future directions

In this paper, we have described the theoretical and empirical foundations for the Let's Connect® parenting program that is grounded in research in the areas of social and emotional development, emotion socialization, parenting, and adult learning theories. This model highlights the importance of caregiver's own SEC, intentional family environments, and emotion-focused relationship skills to promoting supportive parent-child relationships as well as children's SEC, mental/behavioral health, and overall resilience. LC is unique in that it does not simply add emotion-focused components to already existing parenting programs but has its primary foundations in our understanding of the functional role that emotions play in relationships and overall well-being in adults and children. Emotion-focused parenting is not simply a new skill set; it is a new way of viewing all that constitutes healthy parenting and supportive parent-child relationships. Emotion-focused parenting encourages adults to truly understand the child's experience, appreciate the child for who they are, and understand emotional needs that may underlie challenging behaviors and/or emotion dysregulation. Caregivers who engage in emotion-focused parenting are present and in connection with their child, promote their child's healthy social and emotional development in every-day interactions, and able to adapt to their child's needs as they grow and change. They build strong, supportive communication skills that keep the lines of communication open and encourage children to seek support, information, and help, when needed. They also have tools to re-connect and repair disconnection when relationship challenges inevitably arise and to prevent and ameliorate behavioral challenges while staying in connection with the child.

Future research should focus on exploring three key areas: (a) The role of emotion-focused parenting in universal and secondary prevention, (b) Effectiveness of emotion-focused parenting interventions with adults who care for trauma-exposed youth, and (c) The integration of emotion-focused parenting into existing, evidence-based mental health treatments for youth and families. With regard to universal and secondary prevention, future research should continue to evaluate not only the effectiveness of LC or other emotion-focused, parenting approaches but also effective strategies for family and community engagement and service provision to ensure that we can reach all families in need. One area of interest in our work during the COVID-19 pandemic was the role of virtual delivery and family coaching methods to increase access to LC, increase participation, and maximize parent-child coaching. Additionally, future work should evaluate generalization of intervention gains to all children in the home. Emotion-focused parenting should also be evaluated with families who are supporting youth who have experienced significant trauma, given the impact of trauma on youth social and emotional development, relationship challenges, and risk for mental and behavioral health problems. Developers of LC are currently conducting a federally funded, randomized control trial to evaluate the effectiveness of LC with children and families exposed to potentially traumatic events. Finally, future research should also evaluate the effectiveness of integrating emotion-focused parenting approaches into already existing evidence-based treatments for children's mental health challenges such as trauma, anxiety, and depression, given research that demonstrates the importance of caregiver support to successful child treatment outcomes (Yasinski et al., 2016). Additional research is needed to identify the potential benefit of integrating emotion-focused parenting into child and family treatment with regard to engagement, increased parent support, and treatment effectiveness. Future work in these three key areas will continue to expand our capacity to build caregiver and youth SEC, promote supportive parent-child relationships, build youth and family resilience, and maximize the impact of preventive interventions and existing mental health treatments for youth and families.

## Authors' statement

The authors confirm that they have sole responsibility for the conception of this paper, presentation of material/data, and manuscript preparation. This publication was made possible by 90EV0478 from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Kimberly Shipman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Monica M. Fitzgerald:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Conceptualization. **Marcela Torres Pauletic:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

Shipman, Fitzgerald, and Pauletic wish to declare a potential conflict of interest in that they may benefit from positive reports of the Let's Connect® program via proceeds from training facilitators to deliver the program.

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## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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