



# HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH BIG EMOTIONS

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# AGENDA

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- Identifying *typical* parenting responses to children who are struggling with their emotions and behaviours
  - Understanding the *emotionally focussed* approach, which is a *therapeutic* intervention
  - Practicing the skills together - demonstrations and group work
  - Exploring why anxiety is so prevalent and how we can help children and families to cope effectively
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# SCENARIO I

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- Jake, age 10. Loves wearing shorts.
  - Personality: strong-willed, determined, not very flexible.
  - Scenario: it's October, temperature is hovering around 8 degrees in the morning. Jake is at the door getting his coat on ..... and wearing shorts.
  - You tell Jake to get pants on and he refuses.
  - “I am NOT wearing pants. I'm comfortable in shorts and you can't make me”.
  - Meltdown is approaching quickly.
  - What do you say?
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# SCENARIO 2

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- Lucy, age 8.
  - Personality: anxious, cries often and easily.
  - Mother is at the end of her rope with Lucy's meltdowns every day when she gets off the school bus. She is often irritable and angry with her mother.
  - Today, Lucy bursts into tears as she watches two of the neighbourhood girls go home together for a playdate.
  - She throws her bag down, attracting stares from other parents, and starts whining and crying when Mom asks her how her day was.
  - She says, "It's not fair! I don't get a playdate!"
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# ROLE PLAY

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- How, as a parent, do we respond to such situations?
  - Demonstration of typical parenting responses to both Jake and Lucy's scenarios.
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# OUR TYPICAL RESPONSE MAY BE:

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- To try to use logic or reason
  - To minimize concerns
  - To offer rewards or threaten consequences
  - To respond with frustration and anger
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# TODAY, LET'S TALK ABOUT WHAT WORKS FOR KIDS WHO:

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- Have an emotionally sensitive temperament
  - Are anxious
  - Are dealing with loss, change, grief
  - Have ADHD, ASD, are gifted or have other exceptionalities that reflect difficulty regulating emotions and may result in challenging behaviours.
  - Yet, this approach has benefits for ALL children
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# HOW WE FEEL AS PARENTS:

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- Frustrated
  - Sad
  - Angry
  - Out of control
  - Embarrassed/ ashamed
  - Sometimes, love but not “like”
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# THE PROBLEM

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- Behaviours are a reflection of their inability to cope with their emotions.
  - Responding to emotional distress by explaining, redirecting, offering rewards or threatening does not tackle the underlying need.
  - We need to get to the real issue and help children feel connected, secure and calm.
  - Then, once they are emotionally regulated, we are able to problem solve and collaborate with them.
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# HOW DOES EMPATHY IMPACT CHILD DEVELOPMENT?

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- \* If child is responded to with empathy, they learn that their feelings must be valid.
  - \* If the person who is most supposed to understand them sends message they are not supposed to feel how they actually do feel, they lose confidence in themselves too.
  - \* This “mirror neuron” system begins in infancy.
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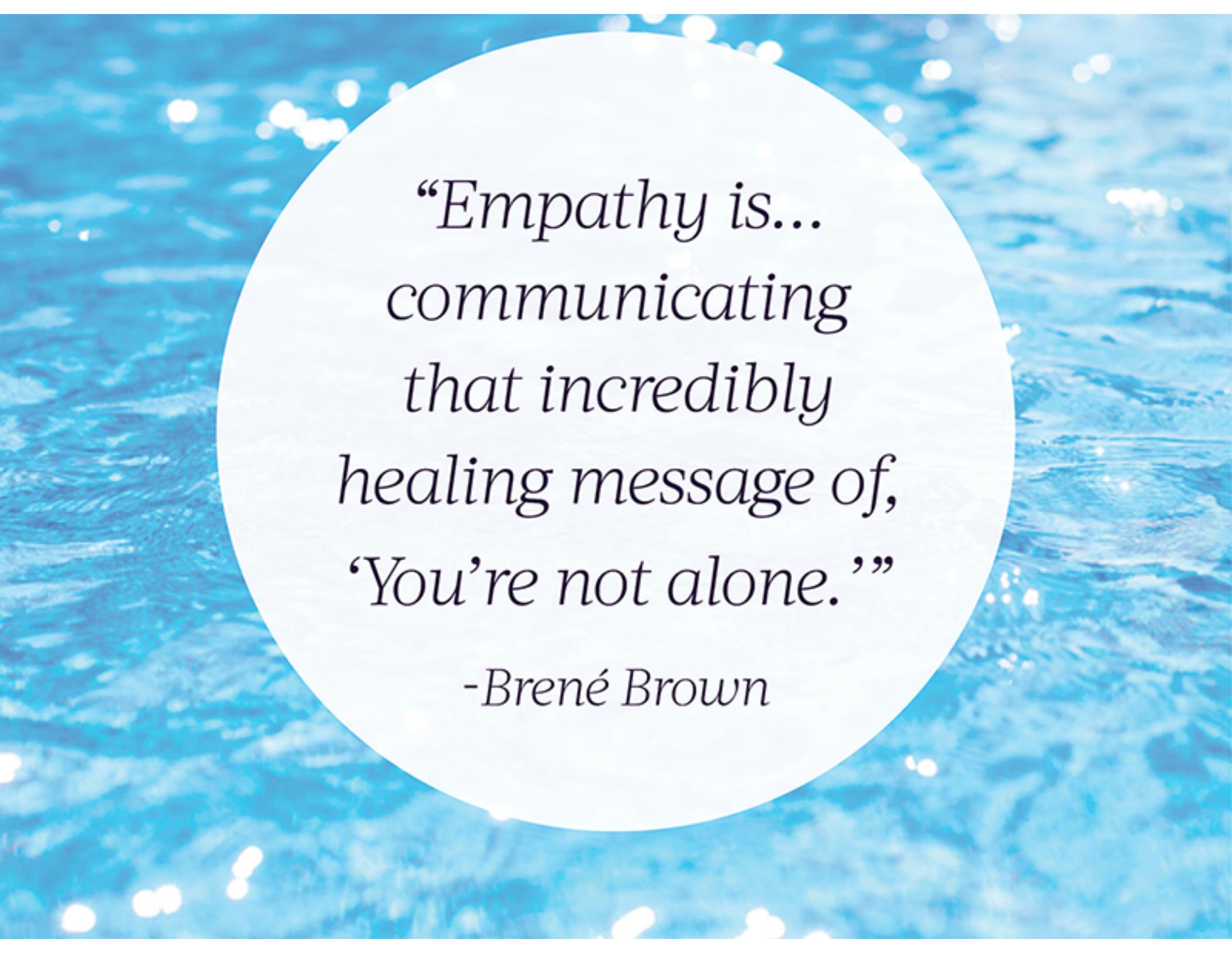
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# ATTACHMENT AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

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- Babies learn how the world works through interactions with primary caregivers.
  - They coo, we coo back. They cry, we soothe and respond.
  - “Happy hormones” are released, bonding occurs.
  - This is how children come to understand the world around them and themselves.
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- There is a shift that occurs when children become toddlers - our expectations of children often change.
  - This can be confusing for children who are more sensitive and anxious.
  - *It is never too late.*
  - Brain is neuroplastic - can learn new responses into adulthood.
  - Every time we listen, provide empathy, talk *WITH*, not *AT*, we create conditions for learning and growth.
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*“Empathy is...  
communicating  
that incredibly  
healing message of,  
‘You’re not alone.’”*

*-Brené Brown*

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## Example: Lucy and bus stop scenario

- If Lucy's Mom says, "Put the tears away, it's not a big deal. You can have a playdate another day", what message does that send?
    - It's better to suppress her feelings, nobody understands anyway
    - Her feelings are not valid, she *shouldn't* feel this way
  - If her parent, who she trusts the most and looks to for confirmation she is doing the right thing, doesn't accept her feelings, how can she trust herself?
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# ADVANTAGES OF EMOTIONALLY FOCUSSED APPROACH

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- Develop a closer **relationship** with your child
  - Stay **calmer** and in control as a parent
  - Helps both child and parents to better **regulate their emotions**
  - As a parent, you **model how to display empathy** and compassion
  - Results in **less behavioural difficulties**
  - Builds emotional **resilience**
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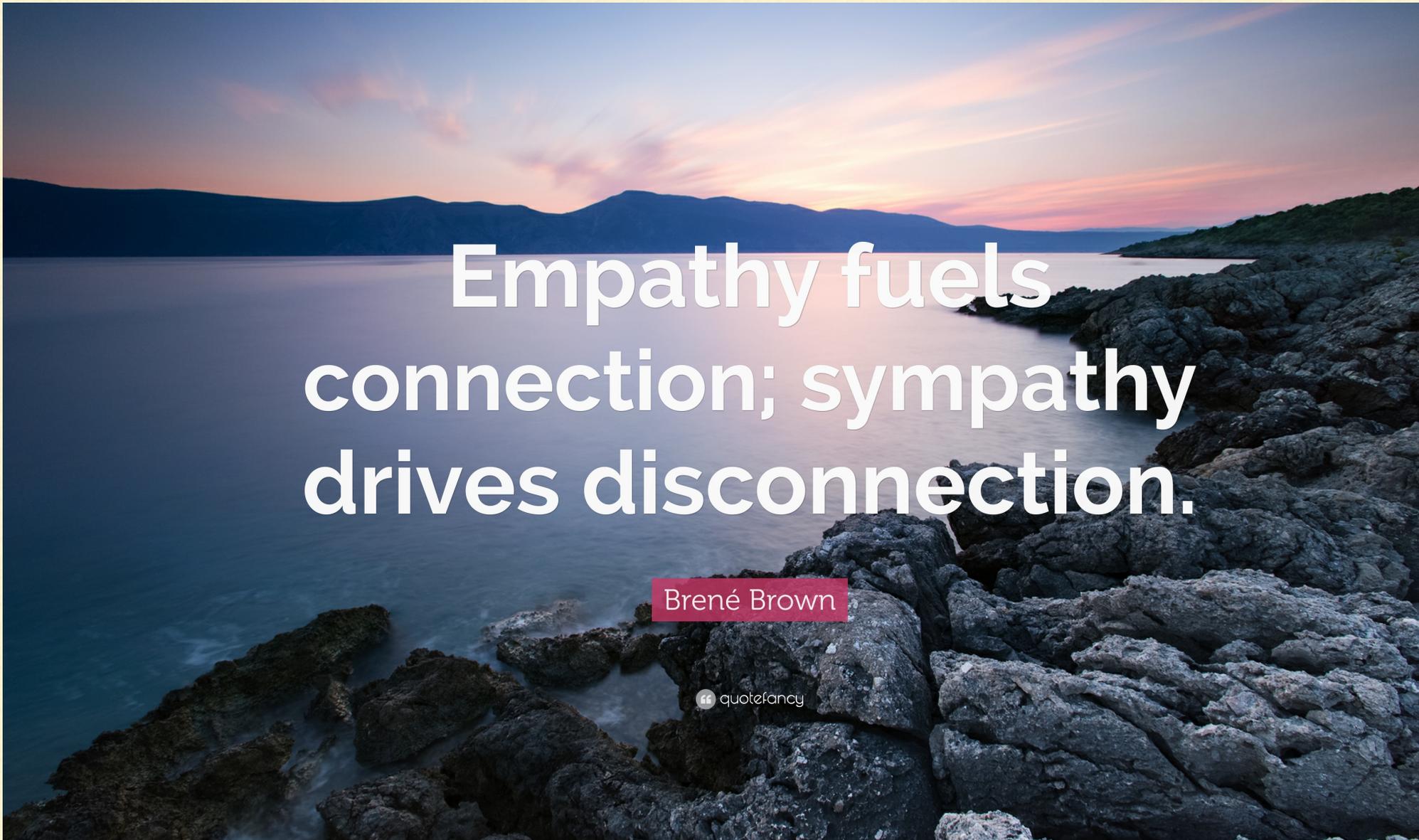
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“ Empathy is the most important part of being a parent; in truth, it is the most important part of being human.”

–Jennifer Kolari, *Connected Parenting*

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Empathy fuels  
connection; sympathy  
drives disconnection.

Brené Brown

quote fancy

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# THE TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

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# STEP 1: FULLY ENGAGE

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- Put aside distractions
  - No screens! They interfere with connection.
  - Make eye contact, gently touch, lean in, crouch down.
  - Be sure your child sees that you are paying attention.
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# STEP 2: MATCH EMOTION WITH AFFECT AND BODY LANGUAGE

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- We want to be in control and regulating our own emotions, avoid a completely neutral or flat affect that leads to children feeling you are disconnected.
  - Use affect and body language to portray that you are listening and understanding (or at least trying to understand!) what they feel.
  - Ex: frown to show frustration, let your mouth fall open and gasp to display your surprise, throw your hands up to show you feel their despair or anger.
  - Time to use your best drama skills!
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# STEP 3: ACTIVE LISTENING

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- If they say how they feel, echo it back to them (in their words or your own).
  - If they can't put their feelings into words, try to do it for them.
  - Repeat their words multiple times if needed.
  - It is very soothing and affirming for them to hear you say out loud what they are experiencing.
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- “It’s so hard when .....
  - “You feel so disappointed because you were ....”
  - “You love wearing shorts! Why do you have to switch to pants anyway? That is really annoying.”
  - “Those friends didn’t invite you to their playdate. That hurts your feelings.”
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# CAUTION!

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- Avoid the instinct to “fix” it.
  - Don’t offer solutions or give advice (that comes later when child feels connected and soothed).
  - Not the time to tell your own stories or provide reassurance (but later that can be helpful).
  - Stay present, show empathy, validate. Tolerate their emotions.
  - *Slow down .....*
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# STEP 4: MIRRORING

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- When you combine connection, use of affect and body language and active listening, you are *mirroring* their emotions.
  - Be careful to not create distance. For example, “I can see that you are angry”.
  - Instead, think of doing a running commentary, as if you are speaking for them. “Oh, it is really terrible when that happens! It’s so frustrating.”
  - Mirroring models how to listen, be empathetic and show compassion for others - all critical skills for children to develop.
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## Example - emotions regarding a peer issue:

- Try to avoid: “*It sounds like you think* those girls are leaving you out.”
  - Why? Implies that the child feels that way, but perhaps should not have those feelings. We want to avoid any judgement or implication their feelings are not 100% valid.
  - Instead, try: “ Oh, sweetie, they are supposed to be your best friends and they didn’t include you in the playdate. You feel really hurt.”
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# YEAH BUT .....

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- IT's OK to have hesitations and be doubtful!
  - If you feel burnt out and the bond with your child is frayed, this approach may seem impossible.
  - Attachment is a dynamic process ... be gentle and compassionate towards yourself if the relationship is a difficult one.
  - You may need to put on an award winning acting performance to change the pattern. Seek support from other family members if possible.
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“The children we least feel like doing this with, those  
are the ones that need it the most. ”

“Ruthless compassion”

—Jennifer Kolari

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# PRACTICE THE APPROACH

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- USE EITHER OF THE CASE EXAMPLES, OR CHOOSE ONE OF YOUR OWN
  - IN GROUPS, HAVE SOMEONE BE THE CHILD, SOMEONE BE THE PARENT, OTHER GROUP MEMBERS PROVIDE SUPPORT AND HINTS
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# ANXIETY

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- Anxiety among children is at an all time high
  - Often present in children with ADHD, ASD, giftedness, etc.
  - Why is anxiety more prevalent?
    - Technology/ Social media
    - Undermining of parental authority in our culture/ peer-oriented culture
    - loss of critical rituals, family time, fast pace of modern life
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- Anxiety does not always present as worrying or nervousness.
  - Many anxious kids present as angry and irritable.
  - They try to control their environment, so they may seem stubborn and inflexible.
  - As parents, we can model coping skills and help build their resilience.
  - Therapy and evidence-based programs such as FRIENDS for Life can be helpful additional supports for families.
  - Emotionally focussed approach is a key piece of the puzzle.
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# HOW ELSE CAN WE SUPPORT?

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- Establish your authority and portray confidence.
  - Gordon Neufeld: “You don’t have to have all the answers, you ARE the answer.”
  - Establish family time that is technology-free.
  - Put family relationships before peers or extra-curricular activities.
  - Focus on connection: use of “baby talk”, bedtime rituals, etc.
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*Thank you!*

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