

THE POWER OF CONNECTION

by Lukas Ritson

We live in a world where technology allows us to connect instantly - yet never before have we felt so disconnected. Whether we seek to create deeper relationships, find fulfilment in the work we do, or even practice compassion for the planet, we are engrained with a universal humanity that desires connection over all things.

Connection is needed instantaneously as we enter the world.

Let's start from the beginning. A child is born and touches its mother for the first time, its little hormones explode with chemical knowing that it's in the right place. This is the chemistry of attachment (Linda F. Palmer, 2002). We are all born helpless and require care and affection to survive. Without kind empathetic care - without love - the brain and body will eventually shut down. In order to stimulate the production of growth hormones and an immune system, a baby's body will shut down if it falls below the threshold of physical affection. This was originally understood in mammals as "runt syndrome", but now we are seeing this "failure to thrive" occur in orphanages with infants (Szalavitz, 2011). The stress system affects every cell in the body - which is preventable. Children are resilient with the right attention and affection.



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“In Denmark, ...children as young as 3 years old are encouraged to talk about teasing and bullying in order to learn about kindness towards others.”

An infant's default setting is love, care and compassion. As we grow into conscious beings, that humanity deepens and we develop empathy.

In Denmark, the national curriculum includes an hour of empathy-building each week for children aged 6-16. Students are shown pictures of other children experiencing different emotions, such as sadness, fear, frustration, happiness, etc. They then talk about the images and discuss what the pictured child is feeling, which helps them understand how to analyse emotions - including their own. Children as young as 3 years old are encouraged to talk about teasing and bullying in order to learn about kindness towards others. This program was contributed by Denmark's Mary Foundation, an organisation established by the Crown Princess Mary with the aim of combating social isolation. Their philosophy is “Everyone has the right to belong.” (The Mary Foundation, 2007) These programs are designed to reduce bullying, improve emotional awareness and articulate thoughts and feelings.


It's no wonder that empathy has become the most important quality in successful leaders, entrepreneurs, managers and businesses. (Jessica Joelle Alexander, 2014)

"Successful people don't operate alone." Jessica Alexander

There is now speculation that with the accessibility of information, employers of the future will prioritise the hire of emotionally intelligent (high EQ) people over intellectuals (with high IQ):

- 59% of hiring managers say they wouldn't hire someone with a high IQ and low EQ
- 58% of positive variations in professional and personal success may be attributed to EQ (Business, 2015)

Empathy increases the capacity to forgive, greatly improves social connectedness and enhances the quality of meaningful relationships, which research suggests is vital for a person's sense of well-being (Jessica Joelle Alexander, 2014). Through empathy, our personal well-being is sometimes threatened when learning of others experiencing harm. For example, animal cruelty might inspire someone to become vegan or vegetarian, or perhaps an injustice of an ecological disaster like the dying coral reefs may cause sadness and anger in others. Interestingly, there is a subconscious need to distract ourselves when experiencing feelings of discomfort or pain from instances where we see tragedy but can't relate to the suffering of those affected. So, how do we distract ourselves? We fill our time with things that don't matter. This results in losing the most important connection of all – the connection we have with ourselves.



"The disconnect of oneself is the base of one's suffering."

More money, bigger houses, fancy cars, expensive clothes; most of us work hard and we want nice things - everyone is entitled to that. But while we distract ourselves with the things we are programmed to believe are important, we sometimes lose sight of the bigger picture. We spend countless hours sifting through social media posts, consuming information we don't need. Teenagers are now spending up to 9 hours a day consuming media (Tsukayama, 2015) - a daunting statistic for our future generations. We like / share / comment on other people's lives, seeking instant gratification through online connection - but what happens when we put that time and energy into ourselves? Would we offer ourselves the attention we so willingly handout to "friends" online? Without our phones, we can feel like we are missing a limb but I invite you to try this simple activity: put your phone down, do something wild and get into nature - after you've finished reading of course :)

"Every child is born a naturalist." - R. Search.

When we are outdoors, our oxygen level increases and heartrate goes down resulting in immediate health benefits. Calmness, clarity, improved concentration and restored mental energy are just a few of the remedies nature offers to balance the mind and body (Lauren F Friedman, 2016). It's important that we take time to treat ourselves with the respect and nurturing we deserve. Take a moment to feel gratitude for your able body that can walk outside, your lungs that can breathe-in good energy, and the time you have to get to the beach or rainforest or bush to enjoy the feeling of the sun on your skin and breeze in your hair.

A top-down photograph of a person kneeling on a gravel path. The person is wearing a multi-colored plaid shirt, brown pants, and a blue knit beanie. Their hands are resting on the gravel, and they are looking down at them. The path is bordered by green moss and some fallen leaves. The background shows a grassy area with some yellowing leaves, suggesting an autumn setting.

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of connection and the path to the feeling of worthiness." Brene Brown

Connection with nature creates the arena to think outside ourselves. Being supported by the environment increases the level of respect and value to the individual self. Therefore, caring for nature ultimately means having higher regard for our own existence within it – taking responsibility and ownership in compassionately relating to the environment. In early childhood education, this is the time that children are establishing trust for the world and educators have the opportunity to lead and model the values of connection. Adults make the mistake of trying to “teach” connection – but children already inherently know how to connect. Instead, we can support them by creating a space for those values to be encouraged, explored and elevated. In order to make an impact, we naturally look to the big names who changed the world, but it’s the people within the community who started with one child that we can draw inspiration from. Park the idea of making grand gestures and start with your own fulfilment as an educator – find your sense of worthy. This will have a monumental impact on the children you care for and it is what they will hold onto for the rest of their lives.

Connection is a powerful, wondrous thing. If we go beyond the physiological idea of humans being on earth to procreate, we can easily see the real reason we are here. Whether it's through love, compassion, intimacy, fear, frustration, strength, reflection – or listening to music and sharing a laugh – through connection we find meaning, and with meaning we are fulfilled.

So, how connected are you?



To learn more, visit us at www.wearthy.co

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR & WEARTHY

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Keeping children curious, creative and confident through offering the adventurous childhood they deserve - this is the principle that elevates Lukas Ritson's play environments. Lukas believes that play should be a holistic experience for children - one that fosters connection, encourages resilience, and cultivates compassion. His innovative playground designs emphasise sustainable, quality materials, as they create a healthy stage for limitless learning opportunities.

His work has touched the lives of tens of thousands of children Australia-wide. He has collaborated with childcare centres, schools, community gardens and educational nature-based events, such as the Green Heart Fair Brisbane and Childhood Summit 2019 by Nature Play QLD. He has also presented keynote talks on sustainability and 'risky-play' in Finland, the United States and across Australia.

Lukas's extensive knowledge as an outdoor educator heavily influences his design style: green open spaces scattered with native plants for free-range exploration; recycled timber structures to climb and welcome risk; secluded zones for quiet moments. A background in the culinary arts drives him to ignite a positive early relationship with food, by incorporating garden beds and chicken coops into early educational centres and schools.

Respect for nature is the ultimate philosophy of Lukas' work, and his life. He currently calls the surf coast of Queensland, Australia, his home - specifically a house in the hinterland with distant views of the ocean. When he's not on his surfboard, recentering among nature, he is reminded of the importance of play while wrangling his two wild children alongside his wife, and Wearthly co-founder, Vanessa.

CONTACT LUKAS TO VISIT YOUR CENTRE

