

WHO ARE YOU & WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY KID?

CONNECT WITH YOUR
TWEEN
WHILE THEY ARE STILL LISTENING

AMANDA CRAIG, PHD, LMFT



New York • Nashville

PRAISE FOR *WHO ARE YOU & WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY KID?*

“Dr. Craig’s brilliant ‘tween’ parenting guide takes the guesswork out of how parents can cultivate enduring emotional connections with their evolving preteen, while also teaching parents about the psychological foundations of human bonding and child development, and how to mindfully practice self-compassion along the way.”

—ANDRE BUREY, MD, CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRIST,
ON STAFF AT SILVER HILL HOSPITAL

“Dr. Craig is one of my favorite experts! She always brings joy and a depth of research to her interactions, and every mom (who I know) in town seeks her out for advice and encouragement. Here, she masterfully integrates knowledge, action, and love to help us in our families as we weave our lives together with our kids. I wish this book had been available to me when my boys were tweens!”

—BRANDI DRAKE, REV. AT NOROTON PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
DARIEN, CONNECTICUT

“Dr. Craig’s expertise in family therapy and experience with her own faith make a powerful combination in this book. She will guide you in building a loving relationship with your tween, so that they will know that you see them, you want to know them, you are there for them, and that you will keep them safe.”

—DIANE ROTH, REV. AT GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH,
CONROE, TEXAS

“Wow, this is a phenomenal read, very inspiring, and full of empowering information about establishing a healthy emotional connection with tweens as they work through their life experiences. I warmly encourage every helping professional to purchase this book to learn about the importance of establishing a healthy emotional connection with their children as early as possible to enable them to have successful personal and relational experiences.”

—DR. GARRETT INGRAM, PHD, MFT-I, OFFICE OF SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS,
ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN’S SERVICES, NEW YORK CITY

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For my sister Val

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SECTION ONE
INTRODUCTION

BeTween Us:
The Future Is Now

So you have a tween...or perhaps you know one. Whatever your reason for picking up this book, I welcome you to this dive into the puzzle that is our nine- to twelve-year-olds. It's crazy-making as they move from the calm of young elementary school through the mayhem of middle school. But there are reasons why and ways to navigate it, and we will cover it all together.

Is it a rewarding time? Yes! But it can cost us—emotionally, physically, and spiritually. There's so much going on! For our tweens, it's a complex stretch tied to profound emotional, physiological, and neurological development with serious ramifications for their future—as teens and then as adults.

So often parents arrive at the tween years with a whoa-something's-happening-here sense of the change before them. And they're right. Something *is* happening...a lot, in fact. But rather than doing anything about it, we park in uncertainty, unsure about this tween in our midst—sometimes a stranger, but still that child we have always known—whiny and complaining but also laughing at silly jokes, cuddling, and wanting to be around us. So we don't think much about it, and instead we move from focusing on the academics and social concerns of elementary school straight to worries about safety, drugs, sex, and the rebellious behavioral issues of the teen years. We miss the tremendous parenting opportunities before us when our kids are tweens.

We don't want to just survive the tween years. We want to be proactive in our parenting. This is a time for *prevention* parenting, for shaping the choices our tweens will make as they move into adolescence. By the teen years, it's all about *intervention*, and the opportunity has passed us by.

And there's so much we can do!

So how do we keep our kids close while cultivating the confidence they'll need to grow up? How do we navigate the inevitable dips, divides, and potholes? Where do we find the strength, calm, self-awareness, and wisdom that amount to a path forward?

Surprisingly, there is very little accessible tween-focused parenting

information available and certainly nothing that links emotional connection—the cornerstone of it all—with what is happening in the tween brain and what we must know about ourselves to lay a solid foundation for the teenage years and beyond. There is even less that ties the science of this to the strength and wisdom available to all of us, secular and non-secular, in our faith teachings. Parents need a blueprint, something more than tactics and strategies, something deeper than that, something that will actually work.

While intentionally written for the faith-curious and spiritual as well as the “faith-full,” this book is driven by *my* faith. The initial draft poured from me, a calling to give parents the information and tools they need to create healthy relationships with their tween, head off problems before they happen, and address them when they do. It presents the wisdom found in faith teachings in combination with what we know from the fields of neuroscience and family therapy, specifically Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)—a therapeutic approach centered on emotional connection (and the backbone of my practice)—and applies them to parenting during the middle school years in a way that is accessible to the general public. After all, when eyes, minds, and hearts are open to it, it is easy to see that therapy is, in fact, a convergence of science and spirituality, beginning with the emotional connection modeled in our faith teachings and continuing through the spirit that lives in each of us.

Clinical psychologist Sue Johnson, the co-founder of EFT, points out that creating connections is hardwired into us. It is the lead element in our most ancient code of survival. We are *meant* to be in relationship with one another. We are *meant* to be in relationship with our tween. But it takes work, intention, commitment, and knowledge. The good news is, when our kids are tweens, we still have a “seat at the table” with them, a chance to teach, to shape, and to help them develop the life skills needed to explore the world around them, before our “chair” is pushed away during the teen years.

In my early twenties, just after I finished my master’s degree in

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counseling psychology, my younger sister Valentina was murdered. She was eighteen years old. I was haunted by questions of what our family and I could have done differently to prevent the choices she made that inadvertently led to this tragedy. It fueled what was already a natural drive to focus on family therapy—observing and understanding family systems and the dynamics between family members. I was so intensely curious about parenting practices and the far-ranging effects of connected and conflictual or distant family relationships that I went back to school and earned a PhD in family psychology. Simultaneously, my faith strengthened, and I leaned into that strength to get through that terrible time. It has remained my foundation since.

I fell in love with understanding how family members impact the feelings of one another—in ways good and bad—and how patterns of behavior in families are generationally formed, always in the background of our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Additionally, I was drawn to the impact of different types of connection within families and how they affect people in adulthood.

My passion for family systems is informed by more than twenty years of clinical experience in family therapy, which was a relatively new therapeutic area when I entered the field. I was interested in how faith teachings could help change toxic patterns and move families toward more positive relationships. Having counseled thousands of family members—couples, blended families, those co-parenting, siblings, children, teens, and tweens—I've viewed family dynamics from every angle, including as a parent of a tween myself, and have come away with a deep understanding of the opportunities to improve tween parenting practices. It is from these experiences that I've selected a combination of case studies from my practice and experiences with my own tween for the book. Together, they create a personal, approachable context for the knowledge I share—the unique opportunities and challenges in raising a tween as well as how to navigate the inevitable conflicts.

It's all about emotional connection, and it is particularly important

Amanda Craig, PhD, LMFT

now as anxiety, mental illness, and lack of resilience continue to plague our young people earlier and more severely, impacting their psychological and physical health now and far into their future—and especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It doesn't have to be that way. Welcome to *Who Are You & What Have You Done with My Kid?*

PART ONE

Love Wins

Emotional Connection: The Secret to Building a Strong Relationship with Your Tween

“Love has an immense ability to help heal the devastating wounds that life sometimes deals us. Love also enhances our sense of connection to the larger world. Loving responsiveness is the foundation of a truly compassionate, civilized society.”

—SUE JOHNSON, PHD, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND FOUNDER
OF EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED THERAPY (EFT)

“(Love) always protects, always trusts,
always hopes, always perseveres.”

—1 CORINTHIANS 13:7 NIV

If you have a tween, you probably know this (all too well): Tweens are nine- to twelve-year-old, fifth- through eighth-grade, cell phone-toting, beginner makeup-wearing, fashionista, TikTok-creating, YouTube-watching conundrums. They morph before our eyes from affectionate and silly fourth graders to hieroglyphic souls, a mystery of contradicting behaviors that can confound even the wisest of parents, testing our patience and fortitude. One minute, we see the adult in them starting to form: They make their bed, brush their teeth, lay out their clothes, take responsibility,

TWEEN BEHAVIORS: THE ADULT THEY'RE BECOMING, THE CHILD THEY STILL ARE

Adult Behaviors We Start to See	Child Behaviors Still Present
Laying out clothes for the next day	Little interest in clothes beyond comfort
Organizing schoolwork and schedule	Trouble putting words to needs, telling time, and knowing their schedule
Sharing thoughts and feelings	Irrational, temper tantrums, whining, or clinging
Decorating their room	More interested in toys than room decor
Making plans with friends without parental involvement	Having disagreements or being overwhelmed by friendship
Going out with friends without adult supervision	May get scared during a sleepover at a friend's house
Having ideas about social trends; discussing politics	Taking things they hear as facts
Understanding the value of a dollar	Little thought about money; focused on "wanting what they want" now
Following step-by-step instructions (in recipes, model making, etc.)	Disorganized, impulsive
Remembering to do chores (no, this does not include personal hygiene)	Chores? What chores?

and express themselves with emerging maturity. The next, they're whining, crying, clinging, or throwing a tantrum like a small child. It's the whip-lash start of the push-and-pull relationship with us that will last through their teens.

The tween years are a crossroads in our parenting journey. I'm there too. (I also have a tween.) It's worth every effort we can possibly make to get it right with our child. And we can! No matter how they may behave, they want us to *know* them; they want us to *care* about their opinions; they want to *play* with us. They're trying to get us to *see* them. They *want* a bond with us. It's called **emotional connection**. Establishing and maintaining it is the key to navigating the conundrum that is our tween.

It's not just about creating peace in our home (as important as this is), it's about using *everything* available to us during the tween years (and there is a lot) to *grow close* to our kids, because **the tween we have today will become the teenager in our home tomorrow and the adult down the road...and the relationship we build now will last a lifetime**. What's more, the closer the bond we have with our kids now, the better we will be able to set them on a course to the life we dream for them.

As parents, we talk about what to do and what not to do in how we raise our tweens as they graduate from playdates to the more independent "just hanging." Some may approach parenting intellectually and intentionally with strategies and tactics. Other parents may try to be pals, or go to the opposite extreme, enforcing strict boundaries as they push their kids to be the best versions of themselves. Perhaps some of us try to protect our child and take it too far, or we roll into each day hanging on for dear life as we try to balance the many demands on our time. Or maybe we just react, for reasons we'll come to understand better in the following chapters. Most of us are a combination of all of the above. When we drive from these parenting strategies, we often lose, because without emotional connection with our tween, we can't really get anywhere. It's why we can *do* all the right things with our tween and still feel stuck.

It's like this: If our relationship with our tween is a house we are building, emotional connection serves as the studs and beams that hold it together.

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THE EMOTIONALLY CONNECTED TWEEN

Emotionally Connected Tween	Emotionally Disconnected Tween
Follows rules	Doesn't understand/mind the rules; can't follow what they don't get
Feels part of family	Feels isolated
More apt to resist peer pressure	Has trouble finding their voice, so harder to resist peer pressure
A better friend, teammate	Suspicious of the intentions of others
Open-minded, more apt to try new things	Avoids new experiences
Shares thoughts and feelings; asks for help	Guarded about what they will share
Makes up after an argument	Ignores, blames, holds a grudge
Learning to be self-aware, empathetic	Insecure about their feelings and how to express them
Resilient	Shut down

That's why everything I say and do with the parents and tweens I counsel (and with my own tween) ties back to creating emotional connection.

With emotional connection, we have trust and a way forward with our tween; we can find out who they are and discover what they've done with the kid we always knew. They register us as part of their team, able to keep them safe in a world that can be unpredictable and, at times, downright scary. To them, we are a place of stability. They see us as someone who wants to listen to their thoughts and stories, and they feel comfortable sharing with us. They know that when things are tough, we will sit with them in their distress, hear their perspective, and empathize with their struggle.

They feel understood and supported. Emotional connection preserves order in the family, reinforces love, and builds respect among family members.

When a strong emotional connection exists, our tween is more apt to follow rules, make up after an argument, and ask for help. They trust our wisdom and how we parent them. We become their guiding light. When we are emotionally connected, we can also have the hard conversations, set boundaries, enforce the rules, and teach the lessons that give our tween the courage and character to be resilient and thrive. They might not always like where we steer them, but they understand it comes from a good place and ultimately has a good outcome for them.

When emotional connection is absent, it's going to be a tough go, pretty much no matter what: The way we communicate love and our desire to be close gets lost in translation. Our tween may think we don't care about what is important to them and register our behavior as something they can't trust, something with hidden messages or intentional meanness. They may feel alone, hurt, and angry and see us as unreliable. They may not respect us, listen to us, or talk openly to us. They may rebel against rules, yell, and cry, latch on to things they don't like and harp on them obsessively, or they may shut down, avoiding conversation and family time. All of this is a protest against the disconnection they feel.

When the inevitable conflicts appear, we may try different approaches: tough love, enabling, engaging, explaining, hands-off, ignoring, punishment, withholding love, hovering, offering more love, nagging, and yelling. We may talk to friends, read books, go to support groups, speak to therapists, listen to podcasts, attempting anything and everything to keep our children safe, only to hit a wall, which leaves us feeling defeated, frustrated, and unsure how to change the dynamic. These are holes only emotional connection can fill.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FOUR PILLARS OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Many of us are parenting our kids to be “happy” or “successful.” We think we’re connecting emotionally but we’re not. Tween parenting is not about doing the “right” thing.

It is about showing up to engage with our child from a place of emotional connection in which we communicate:

- I see you.
- I want to know you.
- I am here for you.
- I will keep you safe.

Here’s what I mean.

I See You

When our tween feels seen by us at home, they feel we truly care for them. They may be different from us or from what we think best serves them, but when we see them for who they really are, and honor it rather than discourage it, they start to feel that they matter and their voice matters.

This translates into stronger self-worth and confidence to share their thoughts.

It comes from being heard rather than being dismissed, told they are wrong, or not given the chance to talk. This gives our tween the opportunity to practice different voices: sharing things that are difficult to talk about, identifying and describing their emotions, and telling us when they are not happy with us or someone else. Sometimes they may not make sense or be quite right in what they are saying or doing, but when we give them space to talk or do things on their own, they pick up on how they sound and discern whether they want to change their views or actions: They grow in how they communicate about the world.

They develop the confidence to talk to adults, coaches, teachers, and peers. They assume they will be seen and heard—that what they say matters, because that is what they have practiced at home. They speak from a stance of “let me share something” rather than “give me attention.”

They are able to show up as a better teammate, classmate, sibling, and friend. They begin to take on the world with an open mind, pushing themselves outside their comfort zone, getting up when they fall down, and engaging with new people, places, and things with curiosity. Simple acts such as raising their hand with a question in class are more attainable to them. They are more apt to say no to a peer doing something they don't agree with because they have the words and emerging self-knowledge to do it, and they take responsibility when they misbehave.

I Want to Know You

Whether they know it consciously or not, our tween is looking for people who will understand them, accept them, and help them make sense of what they are going through...and it is a lot, thanks to the massive neurological changes happening inside their brains. (Fasten your seat belt. We'll get to that in Part Two: It's Not You, It's Neuroscience.) Their emotions can be extreme, and they are not yet equipped to put words to them or turn down the heat when those emotions get too big.

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Happily, at this point in their lives, the people tweens look to most are still adults, namely us! When we show our tween that we want to go deeper, to *really* listen and know them, they will share their thoughts and ideas, talk about their emotions and what they are experiencing day to day. Showing our tween *I want to know you* teaches them self-awareness and empathy while improving their communication and coping skills as well as their decision-making ability. It makes them a better friend: As they feel our empathy, they learn to show it to others.

To know our tween is to take “seeing” them to a whole new, deeper level. And when we go deeper with our tween, allowing them to share what they view as their wins, understanding their humor and their unique take on life, not only do we build emotional connection, we also reinforce the joy of this crazy parenting wheel we’ve jumped on and create a lasting relationship with our tween.

I Am Here for You

It’s no secret: When we’re part of something bigger than ourselves—like a supportive group with which we are fully connected—we feel tremendous security. It’s especially true with tweens when we create an emotionally close family...by playing together, working together, learning from one another, being present for one another, and spending time together. Win, lose, or draw, they know there’s a team to celebrate with them, put things in perspective, and help them rebalance their world when it feels out of whack. They know if they crash and burn, we will pick them up, dust them off, and keep moving forward with them. We build a safe place for failure, falling, and mistakes. And when tweens feel we have their back unconditionally, they feel loved; they feel “good enough.”

It gives our tween the foundation from which to take healthy risks and conquer the fears and insecurities so prevalent at this age. It gives them the courage to sign up for an after-school class, walk into a room where they may not know anyone, and stand up to bullies, even when it means standing against their peers.

When I was eleven years old, I took gymnastics. To this day, I remember a group of siblings who formed their own team. Their mom was their coach. I was captivated...a family big enough to make a team?! Coached by a parent?! As one of just two siblings, I recall thinking how fun it would be to have so many brothers and sisters all doing the same thing together. I imagined they never fought but rather cartwheeled and flipped through their days together, ever growing in their skills as the older kids helped the younger ones, proud parents watching them play and work together. Okay, so there was definitely some childhood fantasizing going on here but what I was picking up on was the *I am here for you* pillar of emotional connection...the support and confidence kids feel in being part of something bigger than themselves, what it's like in a family with common goals and values; a family that works together, helps each other, learns from one another, has fun and plays together.

I Will Keep You Safe

To create fully formed emotional connection with our tween, we *must* set boundaries. Boundaries tell our tween we are committed to their safety, that we are connected to them through the concern that drives our rulemaking. They offer our tween a push pin of sorts, indicating that beyond a certain point, there will be danger. They give our tween the chance to feel the discomfort, guilt, and regret that comes with crossing the lines we set. Conversely, when they obey the rules, they have the opportunity to feel protected by us. Boundaries are also how our tween learns about discipline and delaying gratification.

While boundaries are a key part of emotional connection, I cannot tell you how often I see parents go straight to them without first establishing *I see you*, *I want to know you*, and *I am here for you*. They will fight this tooth and nail then wonder why there's such a disconnect with their tween.

For boundaries to become the connector they can be, our tween must

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feel seen, known, and part of something bigger than themselves. Hard conversations demand relationship first. This is essential, and you will hear it again, because when our tween feels a strong bond with us, they will trust our boundaries rather than view them as a scheme to control them.

The Pillars of Emotional Connection

I see you.

I want to know you.

I am here for you.

I will keep you safe.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda Craig, PhD, is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) based in southern Connecticut and New York City. A native of Richfield, Minnesota, Dr. Craig has been in practice for more than twenty years. She has worked with children, adolescents, adults, couples, and families in a variety of settings including research departments, juvenile corrections facilities, high schools, Fortune 500 companies, substance abuse programs, and university/college classrooms, as well as private practice. She specializes in treating relationship issues such as communication, conflict resolution, and infidelity as well as individual depression, anxiety, addiction, and life–work harmony. Three things she knows for sure: 1) We are not defined by adversities, but how we handle them. 2) Taking healthy risks, setting boundaries, and stepping outside our comfort zone will bring fulfillment in life and relationships. 3) Make the most of this day, whatever that means to you, whatever you can do, no matter how small it seems.

Dr. Craig lives in Darien, Connecticut, with her husband, five-year-old daughter, twelve-year-old son, ten chickens, one dog, two cats, and two fish.

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