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LEADER'S GUIDE:

Closer Than Ever by Sandra Evans
I'm learning how to handle my children.

DISCUSSION FOCUS:
Nurturing your children.

ACTIVITY GOAL:
Participants will understand how to communicate love and care to their children.

STORY SUMMARY

Sandra was neglected and abused as a child and used drugs to handle her painful experiences. When she became a mother, she felt depressed and fearful. Soon she turned to meth whenever she became overwhelmed by caring for her children.

In treatment, Sandra learned to connect with her children through eating together, activities, praise, saying "I love you," consistent discipline, hugs and holding. Her relationships with her husband and her children improved.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GROUP INTRODUCTION: 10 minutes

Today we're going to talk about nurturing our children. Many parents are determined not to raise their children as they were raised, but are not sure how to help their children feel loved and cared for. Simple things like holding infants during feedings, hugging and soothing your children by holding them, following a daily schedule, eating together, planning family activities, praising good behavior, and being consistent with discipline can help you and your children feel close and safe.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?



Closer Than Ever

I'm learning how to handle my children.

By Sandra Evans

When I was 12, drugs became my way to numb out all the ugly feelings I had inside from being molested and being ignored by my mother, who always put men ahead of her children. Eventually I tried meth and became addicted. Those painful childhood memories, the ones that no one talks about, disappeared with meth.

My addiction escalated when I was about 25 and caring for my four children under age 5. My husband, Francisco, and I lived in a neighborhood in Fresno, Calif., where at every fourth house they either used meth or sold it. Soon getting high became my escape from the smallest things—my baby crying, or a fight with Francisco.

I'm not sure what triggered me to start using so much. Thinking back, I see it may have been a number of things. Francisco was going to school, which left me home alone all day. I found caring for all of our children overwhelming and was jealous that Francisco was bettering his life. My role as a mother seemed insignificant.

Filled With Fear

I also feared that I did not know how to be a mom. I did some things well. I always made sure my children were fed and bathed. We would read together and go to the park by our house. But I was really stressed out because I was afraid of making all the mistakes that my mother had made with me.

My addiction made my parenting worse. I was always frustrated with my children and Francisco. I would yell at my oldest, who was only 5, "Make Emiliano a bottle" or, "Take care of your brothers." Other times I did what I had to do but with no emotion. I had become totally numb.

When I got pregnant again, I knew I needed to quit and I wanted to. I would tell myself, "This hit will be the last," but kept using.

No More Hiding

When my baby was born, child protective services intervened. My husband and I met with the CPS workers and agreed that he would stay home and raise our children while I went to

drug treatment with the baby for six months.

The day I was admitted, I felt angry at myself, scared and guilty. I thought, “How did I let it get this far?”

I also felt hopeful. Maybe, just maybe, if I gave this place a try, they could help me deal with all the raw emotions I carried inside. Then I could go home to my children a better mom.

Rebuilding My Family

Through treatment, I got to connect with my family in a much different way than I had before. Francisco and our children came to visit on Saturdays. I looked forward to our visits. I wanted to hear about everything they had been doing.

I would play with our kids, read to them, color and really enjoy our time. These were things I hadn't done with my children too often.

Being in the program with my daughter was a wonderful experience, too. I was able to enjoy taking care of her. We had a special class called Therapeutic Childcare that gave us time and support to bond with our babies.

The teacher, Ms. V., gave me confidence that, despite my childhood, I could raise my children without neglecting them. I tried what she suggested and found that her guidance helped me build a stronger connection with all of my children.

Attention and Consistency

Ms. V. taught us little things that can set the foundation to connect with your children. For instance, I used to make a bottle, put my baby in the bed, prop up the bottle with a blanket, and that was that. She told me that propping the bottle can make a baby choke, get ear infections

and have trouble learning to stop eating when she is full. Most important, feeding the baby in your arms is a way you show the baby you love and care about her.

I learned that children thrive when they have a daily schedule and when you're consistent with them. Ms. V. told me that it's important to get up early with my children, get them dressed and eat breakfast together. She also reminded me to hold my children, tell them I love them, praise them when they do something good, and stick with a punishment once I have set it.

The most valuable thing I learned was that I needed to set aside time to spend with my children to give them the attention they craved. I didn't realize that children need attention in order to thrive.

Closer Than Ever

Francisco and I reconnected during Family Group, where we could vent in a productive manner, and in one-on-one sessions with my counselor. She helped us to understand the roles we had played in each other's lives and work out our differences without blame.

One Saturday near the end of my treatment, Francisco picked me up to take our children to the zoo. I was thrilled. I had always wanted to do that. I'll never forget the expressions on our children's faces while they looked at the animals. It felt incredible to me that we could experience such joy as a family.

Francisco grabbed my hand and looked at me and said, “I love you, babe.” On that day, I knew we were going to be OK. Even though I could not undo the past, we still had a future.

'Can I Do It?'

The day I returned home, I was overfilled with joy but also terrified. So many thoughts went through my head, like, "What if I can't do it? What if my kids hate me? Am I going to be able to handle the stress without getting high?"

I had spent six months only with my daughter and in the safe, structured environment of the program. I feared that I wasn't ready for the real world.

A big moment for me came about a month after I returned home. My caseworker, Geneva Thomas, came by for our weekly visit and my 4 year old started acting up. First he threw a ball at her. Immediately, I got on him and told him to stand in the corner. He told me no and continued to throw things.

I knew he was just trying to get attention, so I decided to ignore him. But Geneva saw that I was getting frustrated. "You need to deal with him," she said.

The New Me

I picked my son up and told him to stand in the corner. He started to shout. Then I was so embarrassed. I wanted to yell at him, "What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you acting like this?"

But that was the old me. I told myself, "That isn't the kind of parent you want to be." So I sat down with him in the corner. I told him we were going to sit there until we calmed down.

It felt like a good solution to me, but Geneva explained that I was punishing myself by sitting there with him. I felt so frustrated and confused. How was I supposed to handle him? Even though it took a lot of work, I finally got my son to

stand in time-out by himself.

In the past, moments like this would have overwhelmed me and I would've gotten high. Not this time, though. I'm learning to handle my kids.

Handling My Children

Now it's been 18 months since I came home from treatment. I feel good. I know how to build a foundation for my children. I am learning to handle their outbursts in a positive way and am reaching out to Francisco for support.

I'm so glad my social worker didn't just throw me out into the world when I was done with treatment. She stood by me while I got adjusted. She also helped my family move into a new apartment and gave us referrals for furniture, clothing and food. Even after my case was closed, she was there if I had a problem or question.

Francisco and I are closer than ever. We are able to communicate without fighting. I feel that we can make it through everything and our love will not fade.

I am also more confident about myself as a mother. Through a program called Exceptional Parents Unlimited, a child development expert comes and works with my children and me once a week. She brings games for the kids to play or comes up with projects for us to do together, like baking or making our own Christmas ornaments.

The activities we share help to strengthen the bond between my children and me. I feel so proud of myself that I'm learning and growing as a mother.

READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer's emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they've handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Sandra learns that children need attention.	What have you been surprised to learn about children since becoming a parent?
Sandra finds that keeping her children on a schedule is a form of nurturing.	How do you communicate to your children that they can count on you to take care of their daily needs?
Sandra spends more time holding and hugging her children and giving them attention and praise.	What little things help you and your children feel good about being together?
Sandra enjoys activities with her children.	What places and activities do you enjoy sharing with your children?
Parenting classes and one-on-one support help Sandra feel confident.	How does your confidence in yourself as a parent affect how you treat your children?

JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences. Hand out the "Journal Reflections" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

NAME:

DATE:

JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: Closer Than Ever by Sandra Evans

It can be difficult to feel close and connected to your children when you're busy and tired, yet pushing your children away can also make their behavior worse, as they whine, act demanding, or misbehave to get your attention. Sandra learned to use firm discipline but also to hold, praise and spend time having fun with her children.

Take some time to reflect on your strengths as a parent and new ways that you could nurture your children.

1. What are some activities that you enjoy doing with your children?

2. What are some times each day when your children can count on having your attention?

3. What are some ways that you soothe your children when they are upset?

4. How do you show your children that you're proud of their behavior?

ACTION STEPS

Sandra finds that when she gets help with her fears, she's able to feel more connected to her children. Write down 2-3 ways that you could handle fears or frustrations that are making it difficult to feel close to your children.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:
