

How to Love Your Child

Even within the same family, each child can be very different in personality, abilities, and needs. Most recently, I came upon a book that intrigued me because it explored the differences in children's "love language". I found this particularly fascinating, since most people don't think of their children as needing different love. After all, love is love, isn't it? We all love our children. But the theory is that just like children need to be managed in different ways, children need to be loved in different ways as well. As we know in education, fair is not always equal. So why should their love needs be any different?

In their book, The 5 Love Languages of Children, Dr. Gary Chapman and Dr. Ross Campbell describe five different "love languages" of children. Although they acknowledge that children need all of these types of affection to some degree, they suggest that each child is different in the primary way that they crave love. The first of their "love languages" is *touch*. Children whose main "love language" is touch mostly crave hugs, cuddles, high fives, kisses, and any kind of physical touch activity (even wrestling). The next "love language" is *words of affirmation*. What these children need most is for others to tell them what a great job they've done and how much they are loved. *Quality time* is the third "love language" of children. These children need to feel your time & presence. They crave watching movies together, playing games together, or having you just watch them while they are playing. The next "love language" is *gifts*. Children whose primary love language is *gifts* are those that feel loved most when they are given a special present or a surprise treat. The last "love language" is *service*. Children with this primary "love language" feel loved most when nice things are done for them like working with them on projects or making special meals for them.

This information is especially noteworthy to those parents who have asked me how their child can feel unloved when they tell them that they love him/her all the time? Maybe that child's "love language" is not about *words of affirmation*. That is not to say you shouldn't tell all your children that you love them, but maybe that isn't enough to meet their primary need. Even as I think about my own children, there are differences in their appreciation for the ways that love is shown to them. Although all my children enjoy all these types of affection, my daughter is happiest when I "play" with her and she gets to "show" me everything she's done. One of my boys is the happiest when we buy him something, no matter how little. My oldest son could care less about "things". He loves to be hugged and kissed and told how proud we are of him and how much he is loved.

So how can you best discover your child's primary "love language?" First, observe how they express love to you and others. Young children may express love in the language they desire most. Pay attention to what your child requests most often. Are they saying, "Look what I'm doing?" (Love language = *quality time*). Are they saying, "Do you like the paper I wrote?" (Love language = *words of affirmation*). You might want to explore the things that your child complains about most often too, because that is also a clue as to what they need. Although all children complain about many different things,

see if you notice a pattern in their complaints and requests. For example, if they complain that you're always busy, they may be seeking love through *quality time*. One last way you can determine your child's "love language" is if you give your child a choice between two options. They may pick the option that relates to their "love language". For example, as a treat, if you ask them if they prefer going somewhere with you or a small gift, their response will be very telling.

Be aware, determining your child's "love language" and using that information appropriately can get pretty complicated. You may want to use the "love language" that your child craves most for behavioral reinforcement. But you don't want to use it as punishment, since that can cause too much emotional pain. I also caution you that your child's primary "love language" may change. At different times as children grow, one of the "love languages" may "speak" more deeply than the others, especially during adolescents. Your son, who craved hugs when he was younger, may pull away from you as a teenager. Children may also prefer one language for receiving love and another for giving it.

So, I challenge you to try and discover which is your child's primary "love language" at this time and as they grow. I also challenge you to discover your own "love language" and how that may impact how you treat your children. Is your "love language" and communication style clashing with your child? Are you responding to them based on your own love needs or theirs? Sometimes information raises more questions than answers. But it's definitely worth the exploration!

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Reference: Campbell, R., & Chapman, G. (1997). *The 5 love languages of children*. Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing