



WAYS TO LOVE YOUR CHILDREN

by Rev. David A. Dauk

The fact that you're reading this article may indicate that you feel you haven't always done a great job of loving your kids in the past. The characteristic that all of us share as human beings is our sinfulness (remember, sin is *anything* contrary to what God wants for us). Because of this shared characteristic, one of the realities is that we don't always love our children the way we want - the way our heavenly Father loves us. So...

START BY ASKING FORGIVENESS

Having acknowledged our sin and past failures in loving your children leads us to maybe the most important thing we can do to ensure that we do better in the future: Ask forgiveness. There is nothing that brings healing and frees us from past mistakes and guilt like forgiveness. So take a moment now to ask God's forgiveness, trusting in His promise in 1 John 1:9: "But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

When you saw the heading at the top of this paragraph, chances are that most of you initially thought about asking forgiveness of *God* - after all He's the one who's given us the gift of our children. But God isn't the only one we must ask forgiveness of. Sometimes - because we can't see him - it's relatively easy to ask God's forgiveness. But the hard forgiveness to ask is of those we can see: Our kids. The next time you do something unloving to your kids (or simply fail to do what is loving), make sure to take the time to say, "I'm sorry for..." (whatever you did or didn't do that hurt them). Not, "I'm sorry, but..." just simply, "I'm sorry." Then say, "Will you forgive me?"

Asking our kids to forgive us for unloving parenting decisions may be one of the hardest of habits to get into. After all, we're parents. We're supposed to be the ones in charge. We're supposed to be the ones who know it all. We're not supposed to blow it. It may be hard to admit our sin to our children and ask their forgiveness, but God always promises a couple of things when he asks us to do something that is hard to do:

1. He promises his presence (and thus his power to do it). 2. he promises to bless us when we do what he asks.

I remember a few years ago when I attended a Promise Keepers conference one of the speakers told about a time that he asked his grown children what he did as a parent that they most appreciated. He told how both of them said what they remembered most was how, when he would do something that hurt or offended them in some way, he would always come to them and tell them that he was sorry and ask their forgiveness.

Don't ever let your past failures to love poison your ability to love in the future. Ask forgiveness. From God *and* your children.

NEXT LOOK TO GOD'S EXAMPLE

God calls us *his* children. If there was ever an example of how to love it is found in how God loves us. There are two very basic ways God shows us that he loves us: 1) With words. 2) With actions.

Showing love with your WORDS:

"I love you."

God often tells us in the Scriptures how (and how much) he loves us. If the two most meaningful words to a child are, "I'm sorry," then the three most meaningful words would have to be "I love you." Those words have the power to melt glaciers that can sometimes grow between you and your children. It is *never* too late to say, "I love you." If you haven't done it lately, do it today.

Tell them about God.

The only thing of lasting value that we can leave behind for our children is our faith in Jesus Christ as only Lord and Savior. If we say "I love you" daily, but never (or seldom) tell our children about the God who loves them, we have not really loved them. Over the past years it seems that in America we have gotten the totally unbiblical idea that teaching our kids about God is "the church's job." Nothing could be more wrong. God plainly tells us in his Word (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Ephesians 6:4) that it is the main duty of *parents (particularly Dad)* to teach their children about the God who created us and saved us from our sin.

An excellent way to tell your children about God is to have a daily devotion with your them. (This also gives you a chance to share your faith with them.) There are many excellent family devotionals. Some are listed at the end of this article. But none will do you any good unless you make the commitment, pick a time and "just do it."

Pray with your children.

Praying with your children is an awesome way to show you love them. Before you say a prayer, ask your children what they would like to pray about. Like any of us, they soon find it is easier to just rattle off some general answer that seemed to satisfy you one other time. e.g. "Thanks for a good day," or "Whatever I did wrong today." Gently press them for specifics, "What made it such a good day?" and "Do you remember anything specific?" Or maybe you'll have to prompt them with questions like, "What would you like to thank God for today?" "What do you need God to help you with?" "Which of your friends needs God's help in some way?" If you know of special things that are troubling them, you should include those in your prayer without even asking. Praying about things important to your children is an awesome way to show them you love them!

And when praying together, thank God for your children.

The one thing that *my* parents did that made the biggest lasting impression on me (and gave me a very positive self-concept) was this phrase from my Mom's daily prayer after our devotion, "Thank you for sending us David. We love him so much." What an awesome thing it is for a child to know that his parents love him so much that they tell God about it every day - and even thank Him for him!

Pray for your children.

It's no secret that our children are beset with temptations around every corner. I have often heard parents say, "The only thing I can do is pray." Maybe it would be better phrased, "The *best* thing I can

do is pray." God in his grace chooses to unleash his almighty power and protection in response to our prayers.

Here are a few things to pray about for them....

- + Pray for their protection from Satan and all the evil influences that surround them at school.
- + Pray for them to choose to surround themselves with Christian friends (because people become like those they hang with).
- + Pray for God's power to help them take a stand for their faith instead of going along with the crowd.
- + Pray for them to develop the special gifts God has given them
- + Pray for them to always love God and his Son.
- + Pray for them to be able to discern between good and evil.

Watch your words. Don't tear down - but only build up.

As God says in Proverbs (12:18), "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." And in Ephesians 4:29 God reminds us through the Apostle Paul, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, so that it may benefit those who listen."

Do a "check-up" of your conversations with your children for a day or two. Keep track of how many negative things you say that could tear them down and how many positive things that could build up. When you hear the words "You always..." or "You never..." coming from your lips, that's a huge warning that whatever is coming next will tear down and not build up.

This doesn't mean that you don't discipline or can't correct wrong behavior. It does mean that you should stop to think before you speak - especially if you are angry. Think about a way to speak in ways that will "build up" instead of "tear down." Some examples might be "How do you think it makes *me* feel when..." or "It would really help *me* out if..." or "How would you feel if I..."

As always, our good intentions won't make positive words come out of your mouth. But God can. Ask him for his help to watch your words. Write out and memorize Ephesians 4:29

Showing Love with your ACTIONS.

There is NO substitute for time spent with your kids.

Someone once said (very accurately) that "love" is spelled T-I-M-E.

There's another a wise saying that goes "No one ever said on his death-bed that he wished he'd spent more time working."

One of the best ways to love your kids is to spend time with them. Time that is both "quality" time (with your attention focused on them) and "quantity" time (lots of it). If you find that you just don't have

"time" to spend with your kids, maybe it's "time" to check your priorities. (A quick glance at your calendar or checkbook will tell you what your priorities are.)

If you find that "money," "stuff," "success," and "personal pleasure" are higher priorities than your kids, remember that your kids are the only priorities "you can take with you." This can give you the motivation you need to rearrange those priorities. Ask God for his help to get your priorities in this order: God > Family > work.

Spend time with each child *individually*.

When you seek to spend time with your kids, remember to make time for each child individually. Kids love it when Mom or Dad spends a day or evening doing something special with just them - not them *and* their siblings, but just them alone. Sit down with your calendar right now and mark off one day for each child each month - a day when you'll spend time with just that child.

Don't forget to discipline

I recently saw a "Hagar the Horrible" cartoon where Hagar was being chewed out by his wife for always fearlessly taking on Attila the Hun but never having the guts to discipline his children. His response, "They might not like me if I do."

There probably isn't a parent alive who hasn't had the same thought. But the Bible is very clear that discipline is necessary and is actually a display of love. Note Hebrews 12:

Have you forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves...For what son is not disciplined by his father? ... we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it."

I'll never forget the time when my son was young and did something willfully disobedient. He needed a spanking, and he got one (along with an explanation of it and a huge hug of reassurance after). His reaction was a great surprise to me. He threw his arms around me and said "I love you, Dad." There was no mistaking the fact that he was thankful I had disciplined him. He knew that I had done it, not out of anger, but because I loved him. He knew he needed boundaries and was glad that I had set them. I was amazed.

Lack of boundaries leads to great insecurity. Discipline sets those boundaries and restores security. It truly does show love. Lack of discipline, on the other hand, sends the message "I don't care."

Worship together and regularly

Children follow the example of their parents. What you worship is likely what your children will worship. And if you want to show you love your kids by bringing them up to know Jesus, they need to see you worshipping Jesus. Each week.

Be "Jesus" to them.

Maybe the best way for children to both know Jesus and know that you love them is for them to see Jesus in you - in action, not just words. Do what Jesus would do. Obviously this is easier said than done, but remember again that God promises his presence and his power to help you to do it. Ask him.

Communicate (i.e. Listen)

Talking is the easy part of communication. We do need to talk to our kids a lot. They need our guidance on the major issues, decisions and temptations they face in life at each stage of life. But we also need to make sure to do the hard work of communication: Listen. This requires us to give our full attention to the child (instead of trying to split attention between them and the TV or them and the internet or them and whatever we're working on).

Turn toward them when they are talking. If they are a lot shorter than you, get down to their level. Look them in the eye. Give them feedback about what they've said. And always "listen" for those non-verbal cues like slamming doors, rolling eyes, sad faces, etc...

TAP INTO GOD'S POWER

Showing love to your children in all these ways may seem to be impossible. And on our own it is impossible, but remember Jesus' statement: "*Nothing is impossible with God.*" Then remember that God's Holy Spirit lives inside of everyone who trusts in Jesus as Lord. When you trust that Jesus is your only Savior and desire to make him Lord of your life, *you* do have God's power living inside you - God's power to do everything he wants you to do! Tap into his power by simply asking for it. Tap into his power by reading his Word every day. God will bless your efforts to show love for your children.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Much of what has been written in the article above is very basic. But in life as in sports, constantly working to master the basics makes the difference between winning and losing. Listed below are some great resources for putting the basics into action.

501 Practical Ways to Love Your Wife & Kids, by Roger Sonnenberg, CPH 1996.

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Two excellent books that provide just what the titles say.

The Five Cries of Youth, by Merton Strommen, Harper & Rowe, 1974

This book gives a much needed reminder of what our youth really want (need) from us.

NIV Parenting Bible, 1993 Zondervan

An excellent "devotional" Bible with lots of short, practical articles on how God would have parents show his love to our children.

Little Visits family devotional series, CPH

Best-selling daily devotional books for families with children at all different age levels.