

raising great kids

By resident education specialist **Perk Musacchio**



The Language of

LOVE

Perk Musacchio explains how to touch your kids' hearts with five ways to communicate

Picture this. You have been away for a trip, and upon your arrival home, your child is curious to know if you brought them a present. It could be a gift-shop souvenir or a freebie from the hotel or conference you attended, but your child dances with delight at the gift you have brought home because kids primarily speak the language of “gifts.”

The Five Love Languages of Children by Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell has become one of my favorite books; however, I wish I had read it while my kids were young. Like all human beings, children have a basic need for love, and we, as parents, need to provide it. Children are primarily emotional beings, and their first understandings of the world are emotional. They remember feelings more readily than they do facts. This means that your children remember how they felt in a particular situation much more easily than they recall the details of the event. As children grow, they are extremely sensitive to the emotional state of their parents and family members. All children, and indeed all people, have a special way of perceiving love. For anyone to feel love, we must learn to speak that person's unique love language. There are basically five ways we speak and understand emotional love.

Gift-giving and receiving can be a powerful expression of love, at the time they are given, and often extending into later years. Children who speak this language will always make much of receiving any gift. They will notice the details of the wrappings, they might “ooh” and “aah” as they unwrap it. They will show it to everyone and make a special place in their room for it. They may hug and thank you profusely. They will share it with their friends and tell you over and over again how much they like it. Seeing the gift reminds them they are loved. Having said all of this, do not go overboard with gift buying and giving. If we give our children too many gifts, we can also cause them to see the world through materialistic eyes. Gifts should be genuine expressions of love; not all gifts come from a store. You can give the gift with grace, and you will want your child to respond with grace, whether the gift is large or small.

Physical touch is one of love's strongest voices. It is the easiest language to use unconditionally because parents need no special occasion or excuse to make physical contact. Hugs, kisses, snuggling with a book, and other playful games are common ways of speaking this language.

Words of affirmation are powerful for communicating love. Words of affection and endearment, words of praise and encouragement, and words that give positive guidance all say, “I care about you.” Children can see through false praise, but when the

praise is true and recognizes effort and perseverance rather than the product, children will know that we deeply believe what we say. On the flip side, sarcasm literally means the “tearing of flesh” and has no place when raising young children. They may easily misunderstand and not be able to communicate their hurt. I know many high school and college students whose self-esteem was torn to shreds by those who used sarcasm as their means of humor or communication.

Quality time is focused and undivided attention. It can require a real sacrifice on the part of the parents. It's much harder to carve out time, especially as children get older and schedules get busier. Quality time is the parent's gift of presence to a child. It does not require that you go somewhere special. It does mean: time with each child, positive eye contact, and quality conversations.

Acts of service can become a model for your child's service and responsibility. We serve our children, but as they are ready, we teach them how to serve themselves and eventually how to serve others. As children mature, they increasingly notice what is being done for them and are also aware of what has been done for them in the past. The same holds true for spouses! I say that as one who definitely notices acts of service around the house, while some of my friends are more concerned about gifts that come in little boxes!

How can I tell what my child's love language is?

Your child's primary love language may change from time to time, especially during adolescence. As you begin your quest to determine your child's (or anyone's) primary love language, it is best to be discreet.

Observe how your child expresses love to you, because he/she may well be speaking his/her own primary love language.

Observe how your child expresses love to others.

Listen to what your child requests most often.

Notice what your child frequently complains about most.

Give your child a choice between two options.

Do this over the course of several weeks and keep track of his/her responses to see if you notice a trend. “Would you like to go fishing with me or go get that new baseball bat you want? I have some free time. We could take a walk or I could fix your toy.”

Whatever love language your child understands best, he/she needs it expressed in one way: unconditionally. This means showing love no matter what. No child can receive too much appropriate unconditional love. A child may be “spoiled” by lack of training or by inappropriate love that gives or trains incorrectly. True unconditional love will never spoil a child. It's also important that, whenever possible, don't discipline your child with the same preferred love language. For example, for children whose primary love language is words of affirmation, words of condemnation or a

harsh tone of voice will hurt them very deeply and can play in their minds for many years. Ignoring or “holding a grudge” against your child for misbehavior may not bother some, but for the child who favors the language of quality time, it will be more hurtful.

Everybody's “emotional tank,” but especially children's, must be filled before any effective training or discipline can take place. When your child feels loved, he is much easier to discipline and train than when his emotional tank is running near empty. A child with a full love tank can respond to parental guidance without resentment. Discipline works best when it is about encouraging positive behavior. If your child is behaving appropriately, provide him with specific praise about the behavior. “Thank you for helping your sister clean up. That was so kind of you.” There are times when a child needs to have consequences for certain behaviors. Remember to try and use these times as a learning experience for the child. The ultimate goal is to help your child develop self-discipline, responsibility, and respect for others. Sometimes natural consequences are best. If a child won't eat, let him feel hungry for a period of time. If you are giving a consequence, it is best for the consequence to fit the behavior. If the child made a mess, have him clean it up or help with other cleaning responsibilities in the house.

One of the most important things about consequences is that you follow through with what you say you are going to do. If you tell your child that you are going to take away certain privileges for inappropriate behavior, then make sure that is what you do. Children need to learn that you mean what you say. Often if you follow through the first few times, then a warning is all that is required in subsequent situations. Try to be consistent with the way you handle behavior issues. That way your child starts to learn what is acceptable, what is not acceptable, and how the situation will be handled.

All of us need to learn how to give and receive love in all languages. Becoming multilingual and learning to speak all five love languages will help us to nurture people throughout our lives, not only our children but spouses, friends, and co-workers.

*Perk Musacchio is the co-author of **No Manual, No Problem: Strategies and Interventions to Help Your Child Thrive in Today's World where many of these strategies and more can be found.** She is also co-author of **A Student's Guide to Communication and Self-Presentation and the originator of the PeaceWalk®.** For more information, visit her website at www.skillstosoar.com.*