

## Five Ways of Showing Love

By author, speaker and dad **Andy Frost**

We all want our children to know that they are loved unconditionally – to realise that we love them no matter what (even if, at certain points in time, that's hard to put into practice!). This means that our love doesn't come with strings attached: if they do well at school/if they get selected to play in the sports team/if they get the haircut we want them to have ... When children grow up in a loving home, they thrive. Research shows that children who know they are loved learn more effectively, are more positive, and are much easier to discipline.

The challenge we have is that the ways in which we, as parents and carers, show our love for our children might be different to how *they* understand love. And what communicates love to one child may not be received in the same way by another child. Authors Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell in their book *5 Love Languages for Children* have put forward the idea that there are five distinct ways in which people give and receive love. They call these 'love languages'. Once children reach around five, six or seven years of age, they will probably begin to best communicate love in one or more of these particular languages. Here's a brief description of each one with tips on how best to demonstrate our love to a child with that particular love language.

### 1. Words of affirmation

Compliments and encouraging words go a long way with children – they thrive on praise! This is not just about praising a child's achievement and behaviour, but appreciating them for the unique and special person they are.

#### Tips

- Leave a note under their pillow saying you love them.
- Write encouraging messages on the mirror.
- Give them compliments.



- Praise them in front of other people.

### 2. Quality time

Quality time is about undivided attention. Your child may understand love in this way if they like having your undivided attention or having you watch them while they are playing. When they are babies, we play on the floor with them; as they get older, we can give them quality time by having conversations, playing in the park, or reading bedtime stories. If there are siblings in the house or we have a very busy work schedule, it's important to create some one-to-one alone time with them.

For single parent mums and dads this can all be much harder. Don't go on a guilt trip, but just grab those moments whenever possible.

#### Tips

- Go out for a milkshake or go on a special trip together.
- Read together.
- Sit next to each other when watching a film.

### 3. Gifts

Children with this love language adore having gifts; for them they are a visible sign of love. It's not about the cost and the size of the present, and they don't have to be given every day, but recognising that this is an important way of making this particular child feel loved is an important factor in communicating our love.

## Tips

- Keep a small stash of inexpensive gifts to give them now and again – not just on birthdays or at Christmas.
- Show that you are thinking about them when you are away by bringing back a small present for them.
- Give them things like shells from the beach or an interesting stone.

## Acts of service

This is your child's love language if they like people doing nice things for them. Of course, parents are constantly doing practical things to help their children – and we want to be kind and helpful to them all the time – but this is about knowing which acts are *particularly* important to them. For example, have we noticed that they really appreciate it when we help them with something or teach them to perform a certain task?

## Tips

- Carry them to bed and tuck them in.
- Make them a special treat or their favourite meal.
- Do a chore for them that they would normally do themselves.

## 4. Touch

There's an incredible emotional power in physical touch. We know that babies need to be held and cuddled and, as children grow up, many still understand love through physical affection. Most children of course, especially younger ones, like to be hugged, but to a child with this love language, things like a simple touch on the arm, a pat on the back and a hug are especially important.

## Tips

- Sit your child on your lap for story time.
- Snuggle down under a duvet to watch a movie.
- Have a tickle fight.
- Hold hands and hug often.

Children need to know they are loved on their terms, but it can be tricky trying to determine your child's preferred love language. Try observing how they themselves show love to others and listen to their requests and complaints. As they get older, it becomes easier to spot their love language if you look out for it.

I found that my eldest would often complain about not getting to do things alone with me or my wife. It slowly dawned on us that she might best receive love in having quality time – time when she got our undivided attention. We have since made it a weekly routine for me to take her for a run in the park so that we can jog and chat together. And my youngest loves physical contact. I have noticed that she will take any opportunity to climb on us and wrap herself up in our arms. So when we say goodbye after dropping her off at nursery, we are particularly intentional about giving her a warm hug as we tell her we love her before we leave.

You know your own child better than anyone, so you are in the best place to assess their main love language. Particularly if your child has additional needs, there may also be some things that you will *avoid* doing as you know they will find it difficult.

While it's good to focus on our child's main love language, it's important to remember to use the other four as well. Although our children receive love best from one or two languages, they will always benefit from *all* the ways in which we show them unconditional love.

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Have a look at how your children respond to the different ways you love them, and how they show you love. Does anything stand out? While they are little they especially need *all* the love languages, so keep trying different things as they grow up to show them that unconditional love.