

10 Ways to Really Love Your Child

My own children are grown now. I did a lot of things wrong, but here are 10 practical love-in-action things I did right for you to consider. Remember, love is what love *does*.

1. Lead Your Children in Family Devotions

Three or four days a week during the school year, we had a 15-minute family devotion. I usually started with a life situation—something in the neighborhood, from the newspaper or a school situation. Then I read a Scripture passage that applied. We finished with each of us saying a short prayer. To make the prayers more than “Let us have a good day,” we also prayed for someone in need each time.

2. Establish Work Boundaries

To make family my priority, I set up some rules: Leave work no later than 6:00 p.m., don’t take work home and don’t work weekends. During my evening commute, I’d let my mind process what I’d been doing during the workday—until I drove over a creek about a mile from our home. Then I would put everything into a mental briefcase and toss it into the creek. That gave me a couple of minutes to prepare to greet my family.

If you want to lead a balanced life, decide how many hours you want to work, and stick to your guns. Put work appointments on your calendar in pencil, but put your family commitments in pen. Love is time, and time is love.

3. Make Your Family Your No. 1 Ministry

A tornado ripped through our church building. The call went out for volunteers to help clean up on Saturday. But my son had a game that day, and I thought the game was a higher

priority. On Sunday the volunteers were asked to stand and be thanked publicly. I briefly felt guilt and shame for not having been there with them.

Without intending to do so, churches can put pressure on you to serve others to the neglect of your own family. What's your response going to be? No one else cares about your family like you do. No one else can, or should, take responsibility to disciple your family. That one's on you. You have to set boundaries. Your most important small group and ministry is your family. Until you get this right, you really shouldn't be doing ministry anywhere else.

4. Spend Time With and Date Your Children

When our kids were young, we played board games after dinner. I endured endless, mind-numbing repetitions of Candy Land and Chutes and Ladders—games that require the IQ of a goldfish. I drove our kids to school during the week and stayed home with them every Saturday morning while Patsy ran errands. I cherished this time with them. Once they became teenagers, I started taking one child out every Tuesday for a dinner date and something fun, like ice cream, go-carts or the mall. Looking back, those were the best, and almost only, one-on-one times we had. If you're not intentional about this, a whole year can go by without you sharing a single deep conversation with your kids.

5. Pray For and Encourage Your Children With Words Every Day

I realized that my wife and I were probably the only ones who would intentionally be praying for our kids every day. So I made up a list of things to pray over: their salvation, growth, integrity, work ethic, protection, future mates and so on. I don't think it's a coincidence that all the specifics we prayed for are today a reality.

I also made it a goal to tell each of my children daily, "I love you, and I'm proud of you"—words I didn't hear growing

up, which still affects me today. There's biblical precedent for this: At both the baptism of Jesus and the transfiguration, God spoke and said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy." In other words, "I love you, and I'm proud of you."

6. Pay Your Children to Read the Bible

Nothing has more potential to transform our children into faithful followers of Jesus than reading God's Word. But it probably won't happen by itself.

Patsy and I had an unconventional idea about this. When our kids were about 12 and 9, we decided to pay them to read the Bible. We told them, "If you will read five minutes a day for 25 or more days in a month, we'll give you the money to buy whatever CD you want." I thought I detected a yawn.

Then we added, "And if you read 25 days for 10 out of 12 months, we will pay you \$250." Suddenly their eyes lit up!

Finally we said, "But if you read 25 days or more a month for all twelve months, we will double that and pay you \$500." That really got their attention! Our kids made monthly calendars, taped them to their mirrors, and made an X through each day they read. We put them on the honor system and even gave them the ability to make up missed days.

Was that bribery? I don't know. But our kids always did their daily devotions, and they both love Jesus. Paying our kids to read the Bible was the single best thing we ever did for our children's faith.

Be careful to focus on shaping their hearts and not controlling their behavior. It worked for us because we raised our children in a grace-based home rather than a performance-based home. Don't let it become legalistic.

7. Attend as Many of Your Children's Activities as Possible

Perhaps because of my own experience with my parents not attending my games, I decided from the start that I would never miss a recital or a game. And I never did. Fortunately, my work allowed that flexibility. One of my greatest joys came the day my son said, "Dad, I don't know what I want to do, but whatever it is, I want a career that lets me attend my kids' games like you attended mine."

8. Eat Dinner Together

The dinner table can be the medium that allows families to transfer spiritual and moral values from one generation to the next. So we made eating dinner together a priority. We worked around school activities and didn't answer the phone during dinner. That's not likely to happen every night without fail, but at least don't make choices that preclude it.

9. Expose Your Children to Ministry

We participated as a family in many of the ministry opportunities offered by our church. In fact, we selected ministries precisely because we *could* include our children, such as housing visiting missionaries and delivering Thanksgiving meals. When they were older, our kids went without us to youth camps and on mission trips, which helped them build confidence in their own faith.

10. Make Your Children Responsible to Attend Church

Just as it's foolish to let your kids skip school, it's foolish to let them skip church. When kids are young, they will freely go to church if you go. Once our kids were teens, though, we experienced resistance. They were "too tired to go to church" after being out on Saturday night. So rather than do battle every Sunday morning, we transferred responsibility for attending church to them. If they were too tired to attend church, they could sleep in and skip church, but then the following Saturday night, they needed to stay home so they wouldn't be so tired. Guess how many times that happened

again?

You Hold an Awesome Power

Right now, your kids desperately need to know that someone loves them as they are. They yearn for someone who will overlook their faults, forgive their sins and love them without reserve. They hunger for someone who delights in and believes in them. They thirst for someone who thinks they're great—who thinks the best of their motives. Whether they can articulate it or not, they long for someone who will make them feel safe.

You Are God's Designated Solution

Are you willing to make the first move ... and keep on making it?

Challenge yourself to risk everything to be a vessel of God's love. It will transform your relationships, starting at home. Use the love word indiscriminately, even recklessly. Ask God to empower you to be uninhibited in love. Jesus proved it's true: There's nothing more powerful in this world than a man who will love without reservation.

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