

5 Essentials to Winning Your Child's Heart

A few years ago, Jenifer and I sat in a conference with Stuart and Jill Briscoe. This amazing couple, who have both long since passed their 70th year, had much to say about the lessons they have learned through the years about parenting. I clearly remember Jill casually stressing the importance of the connection between a parent and child:

"You want your kids to like you. If they don't like you, they won't listen to you. Think about it. Do you listen to people that you don't like?"

We cannot afford to downplay the importance of the heart connection between a parent and a child. If you want to lead and influence your kids but don't have their hearts, much of your effort will be in vain.

What must parents do to connect with the hearts of their children? And how can parents keep their children's hearts once they have them? There is an excellent example of this very thing in the life of Absalom, the son of King David. The Bible says that he successfully *"stole the hearts of the people of Israel,"* shifting the allegiance of the people from this father to himself and enabling him to step in as king. Though our desire is not to overthrow a government, but to maintain a prominent place of love and influence in our kids' lives, we can learn much from what Absalom did.

So how did Absalom gain the hearts of the people? The first six verses of 1 Samuel 15 tell the story:

"In the course of time, Absalom provided himself with a chariot and horses and with fifty men to run ahead of him. He would get up early and stand by the side of the road leading to the city gate. Whenever anyone came with a complaint to be

placed before the king for a decision, Absalom would call out to him, 'What town are you from?' He would answer, 'Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel.' Then Absalom would say to him, 'Look, your claims are valid and proper, but there is no representative of the king to hear you.' And Absalom would add, 'If only I were appointed judge in the land! Then everyone who has a complaint or case could come to me and I would see that they receive justice.'

"Also, whenever anyone approached him to bow down before him, Absalom would reach out his hand, take hold of him and kiss him. Absalom behaved in this way toward all the Israelites who came to the king asking for justice, and so he stole the hearts of the people of Israel."

There are five things that parents can learn from Absalom's actions. They are, in many ways, obvious dimensions of parenting that should be evident in our homes on a daily basis.

1. We must invest significant time in the relationship.

The first part of verse two says that Absalom *"would get up early and stand by the side of road leading to the city gate."* He went out of his way to be where he was likely to come into contact with the people. Getting up early was a sacrifice of his time, but he knew it was worth it.

In a similar way, parents must carve time out of their busy schedules to be with their kids. My friend Brent had a great relationship with his daughter when she was a teenager. I would ask him what he did and his answer was always "cards." She liked to play cards. He discovered that when he would sit at the table for a few hours and play cards, they would slowly develop a heart connection and she would eventually open up about what was going on in her life.

In my own home, I know well the challenges of keeping our family connected. We have to work very hard to make sure that

we are sharing meaningful time together. In those times when we are not, we can sense an obvious disconnect within our home.

While the next four things that Absalom did are skills that can be learned, this first one is not something that can be taught. Carving out more time for your kids may require some radical adjustments to your life, but it is essential if you want to truly have their hearts.

2. We must take an interest in their world.

The second part of verse two describes how Absalom took a sincere interest in what was troubling the people of Israel. *"Whenever anyone came with a complaint to be placed before the king for a decision, Absalom would call out to him, 'What town are you from'" He would answer, 'Your servant is from one of the tribes of Israel.'"*

Just like Absalom did, we must learn to ask questions of our kids and then take time to listen to their answers. Not with preconceived notions of what they will say. Not with a plan to make sure we have the final word when the conversation ends. We need to ask questions and then shut up and listen. It may take a while to get past the initial grunts and short answers that teenagers are prone to give. But if we are first investing the time and then truly taking an interest in their lives, they will eventually open up.

In my home, we have found that our kids' tongues are the most loose at bedtime. On many nights, just as we are drifting off to sleep, there is suddenly a teenager at the foot of our bed. While it's tempting to ask them to come back tomorrow, we must take advantage of those moments and enter their world whenever they invite us, even if it's past our bedtime.

3. We must offer kind words that show sincere empathy.

Verse three in our story tells of Absalom's typical response

to a person's grievance: *"Look, your claims are valid and proper, but there is no representative of the king to hear you."* He did for the people what Jenifer constantly has to remind me to do for her. "Show some empathy. Validate my feelings. Tell me that I am not crazy for feeling what I am feeling."

Nothing will draw together the hearts of two people more powerfully than offering this kind of empathic listening. It is what powerfully bonds lifelong girlfriends (or so I am told). It is what draws the heart of a woman deeply into that of her husband. And it can serve as an essential key to connecting the heart of a teenager to the heart of his or her parent. Unfortunately, parents tend to turn off their empathetic listening switch when their kids become teens. The result is that your kids sense that you are not a safe place for them. In their mind, all you have to offer them are useless opinions, quick judgments and long lectures.

As a father, I have to discipline myself to offer understanding and emotional support to my kids when they tell me of what is happening in their lives. While I want to scream "get over it ... it's not a big deal," I must bite my tongue and offer gentle words of encouragement instead.

4. We must use meaningful touch in an appropriate way.

The details of Absalom's strategy offer us one more key to connecting with our kids' hearts. Verse five tells us *"whenever anyone approached him to bow down before him, Absalom would reach out his hand, take hold of him and kiss him."* This no doubt provided the people with a sense that Absalom was personally concerned with significantly present with them in their situation. Likewise, we cannot deny the power of physical touch in connecting powerfully with our kids.

When they were little, my kids willingly came to me for

physical closeness. They would crawl into my lap or want to cuddle at bedtime. They were always open to hugs and other embraces. It was easy. As they became teenagers, things got a little more complicated.

Now, I have to creatively look for ways to give my teenagers the physical closeness that they deeply need but that they don't voluntarily seek. It means wrestling with my boys. It means gently laying my hands on my daughters' heads and saying "I love you." It means dropping *everything* in those rare moments when they do want a hug or some physical comfort. When they seek me out, I need to let them know that they are my greatest priority.

Everybody is different in regards to their need for physical touch, so we must pray for insight into the needs of our particular children. But everybody needs a gentle touch at some point. Parents who want to have the hearts of their children cannot afford to ignore this.

5. We must bathe our kids in unconditional love.

While not specifically seen in the story of Absalom, we must see unconditional love as the fuel that drives the four essentials mentioned above. If we strive to connect with our kids but they suspect that our love for them is conditional, we are unlikely to have any real heart connection.

Our kids must be convinced (and we must strive to convince them) that our love for them is exactly like God's love for them: not based upon what they do or how they act, but upon who they are. Most parents are certain that they would never communicate conditional love to their kids, but it is the message that many of our teenagers are getting. They feel the heaviness of meeting our expectations and they see the joy on our faces when they do. It inadvertently assures them that they must perform to be loved.

Pursuing the hearts of our kids will be a journey that never

stops. But just as getting in shape is a lot harder than staying in shape, keeping a child's heart is much easier than trying to re-capture it once it is gone. Wise parents who want to influence their kids will focus their lives on building and nurturing a powerful love connection with them. One that evolves and changes as their kids get older. They will learn to patiently love their kids as they move through the challenges of adolescence.

Is it easy? No. Is it possible? Absolutely.

*This post was taken and revised from a chapter 21 of "The Talk(s)." It is my book designed to equip parents to help their kids to navigate their sexuality. You should totally read it. [Click here](#) for more information.

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