

The Power of 'I Love You' From Dad

Here at the National Center for Fathering, when speaking to groups of men we'll often conduct some informal research about affirmation and love from fathers. Typically we'll ask, "Please raise your hand if your father told you that he loved you on a consistent basis."

The results are predictable, as are the jaws that drop in amazement. Usually only 3-4 percent of the dads will raise their hands! And I'm sure the majority of those men are still waiting to hear their dad say, "I love you" for the first time.

For me, it's another picture representing the culture of fatherlessness that we're living in, because even when dads are present in their kids' lives, too often they aren't connecting with them in a meaningful, affirming way.

Like father, like son ... dads who didn't hear "I love you" growing up often don't feel natural saying it to their children.

Now, some people may say it's no big deal. A lot of people who didn't have that benefit still grow up and do fine. But our research and experience at the National Center tells us that those three words, spoken with sincerity and backed up by behavior, can demonstrate support, encouragement, tenderness and caring as much as anything else we do as fathers.

I believe it is a big deal.

Our words—or sometimes our lack of words—can either bless or discourage our children for their entire lives. And we've heard all the excuses: "They know how much I love them." "I don't want my son to get a big head." "It just isn't what we

do in our family.” But those are just excuses. If we know how much it benefits our children, there’s really no reason we shouldn’t say it.

If, for some reason, telling your child “I love you” is too difficult for you, here are some ideas you might try as you work up to it.

- Go into your child’s room at night, when he’s sleeping, and “practice” saying it to him. Keep doing this every chance you get, and before long it will feel natural enough that you can say it when he is awake. It may even slip out before you realize it.
- Try writing, “I love you” on a card or in a letter or short note. (Just make sure you don’t stop there. Work up to where you can say it to him.)

Sure, it may be awkward or even difficult at first, but it’s worth it.

Eventually, you can come right out and say: “I just want you to know that I love you and accept you totally, just as you are. I love you whether you succeed or fail. I love you because you’re _____ [insert your child’s name].”

Your children gain great confidence and security from knowing you place high value on them. Use words to build them up at every opportunity. Give them plenty of “I love yous” and other positive phrases that will echo in their minds for a long, long time.

Action Points for Dads on the Journey

- Get a small voice recorder that’s attached to a photo frame (or that can be attached) and record a short message of love that your child can play over and over. (Great for young kids, or as a Father’s Day gift from a child to a dad.) Here’s an example.
- Honor your child by throwing a “just because” party—one

which says, “I love you” for no particular reason—just because.

- Find ways to reinforce your “I love you” message through actions, like a big hug at bedtime or any time, following through on promises, doing small favors, etc.
- Use the milestone events that happen this time of year—graduations, performances, sports events, etc.—to communicate to your child, verbally and in writing, “I love you just as you are, and I’m proud to be your dad.”
- Ask your child to autograph his or her picture, then display it in your office like you might display something from a celebrity or sports star.

Do you have unique ways to demonstrate love to your kids? Please help other dads by commenting either below.

Carey Casey is the CEO of the National Center for Fathering, a nonprofit organization seeking to improve the lives of children and establish a positive fathering and family legacy that will impact future generations by inspiring and equipping fathers and father figures to be actively engaged in the life of every child.

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