

Adapting The Love Languages To Individuals With Autism And Related Disorders And Disabilities

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Like all parents, the parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and related disorders and disabilities want to express unconditional love and support for their kids. In fact, feeling unable to express love and care is one of the biggest frustrations that I have heard from parents in my work as a special education teacher. How do you express affection to a child who doesn't like to be touched? How do you give praise and affirmation to a child who isn't verbal? Or, how do you show any kind of love at all to a child who leaves the room when you enter?

All of these are problems that the parents I work with have encountered—and problems that I've encountered myself as the mom of a special needs daughter. Fortunately, there are ways to adapt how you express love in order to meet the needs of your child. When I read *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman, I realized I was going about loving my child the wrong way. I will give you an overview of the love languages and then give suggestions for modifications you can make when interacting with your child. But first, let's look at why it's important to express unconditional love to your child.

The Impact That Expressing Love Has on the Special Needs Child

I like to say that every child runs on love—every child has a love tank that needs to be filled up daily. A full love tank gives children the emotional strength that they need in order to get through the day. Unconditional love is the premium fuel that fills your child's love tank the fastest, lasts the longest and takes care of your child the best. This is especially true for our children with special needs, who may require more support and more expressions of love than other children.

A few more notes about expressing unconditional love: Unconditional Love is a “No Matter What” Kind of Love. Unconditional love carries the most powerful messages and helps children feel accepted, calm and supported. Many parents may have a concern about spoiling or coddling their special needs children too much. While a failure to discipline or always giving in to your child can create a spoiled, misbehaved child—this has nothing to do with love. It is impossible to spoil your child with love or to love too much, so go ahead and love on your kid. In fact, I believe that a child's emotional love tank must be filled before any

discipline or learning can occur.

With a Full Love Tank, Your Child is More Likely to Be:

- Well-adjusted
- Happy
- Resilient

With an Empty Love Tank, Your Child is More Likely to Be:

- Insecure
- Angry
- Inaccessible
- Immature child

Of course, children with autism can have many physical, emotional, psychological and developmental challenges, and it would never be suggested that love can solve all problems. But that love is the foundation—and it's far more difficult to address behaviors and other issues associated with autism if you haven't first communicated unconditional love and acceptance.

How To Discover Your Child's Love Language

The Five Love Languages are: Physical Touch, Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Acts of Service and Gifts. These languages refer to the ways that people both give love to others and the ways that they understand love. While everyone gives and receives love using all five methods, most people have one or two preferred languages or ways that read as love more readily and more fully.

To fully express love to your child in the way that make sense to him/her (not just how you want to give it), you need to spend some time figuring out his/her love language, and then show love in the way your child understands it best.

I am sure some of you are wondering, "How do I know if this is my child's love language?" That is a great question! Here are ways to figure that out after each of the five topics.

Physical Touch

Physical touch for most people is a basic human need. You could even say that it is a natural instinct. It can provide emotional security. It is also one of the easiest to use unconditionally. However, many children with ASD do not find this to be comforting at all.

There are many ways of showing physical touch. Here are examples. Modify them as your child shows you what is acceptable:

- Hugs and kisses
- Comb hair
- Stroke their head or back (being aware of the type of pressure they prefer is a must)
- Ask often if they want to be held or cuddled
- Bear hugs
- Hug them after applying discipline!
- Tickling
- Holding them when they are sick
- Hold a special toy
- Family "Group Hugs"
- Hold your child on your lap

Ways to tell if physical touch is their love language: Does your child...

- Ask or seek out hugs
- Like to cuddle
- Like physical games or contact sports
- Like holding your hand

Like holding your name

- Like to “rough house”
- Like back rubs or likes giving them to you

Words of Affirmation

This can be a very powerful way to communicate love, affection, praise, encouragement and guidance. It nurtures a child's inner sense of worth and security. This can be very important for our children with special needs. We live in a world where being bullied is very real, and parents should commit to helping their child by developing positive self-talk by using words of affirmation. There is a quote from Joel Osteen that hits this point. He said, “You can change your world by changing your words...Remember, death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

Remember, anger is the enemy of encouragement. It is not always what we say. Tone of voice, body language and volume of voice and frequency all play a factor in words of affirmation.

Here are some things you can do to use words of affirmation. As always, modify based on your situation:

- Encouragement jar
- Lunchbox notes
- Talk about their accomplishments, even if they seem small to you
- Record your feelings of love for your child to listen to when you are absent (this is particularly important if you travel for work often)
- Notes/emails/calls each day when you are gone on a trip if possible
- Call just to say “I love you”
- Say “I love you” every time you leave
- Give heartfelt compliments

Ways to tell if words of affirmation is their love language: Does your child...

- Smile when you affirm or praise them
- Verbalize their feelings
- Seek your verbal approval
- Write notes or give cards to others
- Overreact to criticism or harsh words

Quality Time

Quality time is giving undivided attention...commit to making time for your child. Quality time spent together says, "You are important, I like being with you." Focused attention equals feeling loved, and time spent together creates loving memories.

Activities that show quality time:

- Daily chores together (modeling)
- Pleasant, loving eye contact
- Cook and eat together
- Display pictures
- Let your child choose the activity
- Plan a date with them
- Ask open ended questions
- Go to lunch
- Create tradition
- Campouts
- Family activities (game nights)

Ways to tell if quality time is your child's love language:

Does your child...

- Ask to spend time with you
- Talk about fun times or events you have had
- Seek your company, even if you are doing something they don't really enjoy
- Have a tough time parting from you
- Want you alone to themselves
- Share their ideas and feelings with you

Acts of Service

This is performing a service that your child views as valuable. This also models love when we do for others. This can also provide motivation to do for themselves and others.

Here are just a few examples of acts of service at home:

- Tying their shoes
- Perform daily duties with a loving heart
- Show charitable acts to others
- Surprise meals
- Set up a favorite toy or game
- Select one specific act to do daily

Ways to tell if acts of service is your child's love language:

Does your child...

- Request you to fix something important

- Seek your help with projects or homework
- Show they are joyful when you surprise or treat them

Gifts

Gifts are items that are given to the child. It can be more than just “a tangible object”, and size and cost of the object does not matter.

Here are things you can do at home for gifts:

- Special presentation
- Thoughtful selection
- Small “treats”
- Mail a gift when you are away
- Gift bag
- Personalized gifts
- Song or letter
- Scavenger hunt
- Lasting gifts

Ways to tell if this is your child’s love language:

Does your child...

- Appreciate the gift “buildup”
- Seek undivided attention at “gift time”
- Keep and show off gifts

- Big show of thanks after receiving the gift

Ultimately, discovering your child's love language just takes time, patience and practice. Here are a few useful tips to get you started:

Ask "How do they love me?"

How do you know that your child loves you? When trying to express love to you, how does your child go about it? Does he or she draw you a picture? Does he or she sit next to you on the couch? Or suggest a favorite shared activity? You may not have thought much about it, but take some time to notice how your child reaches out to you.

Ask "How do they love others?"

What about siblings, teachers and friends? What does your child's teacher say about your kid? How do you see your child trying to make friends or interacting with siblings?

What are their frequent requests? Their frequent complaints? Does your child ask for time with you?

Provide choices that have more than one love language.

While the other tips require you to pay attention and use some reasoning skills, this is a more proactive tip. Give two or three choices and see which one your child picks. During play time, would your child rather rough house (physical touch), help you cook (acts of service) or do a favorite activity with you (quality time). For a reward, would your child prefer a toy (gifts) or a special activity (quality time). Experiment a little bit to discover your child's preferences.

By paying attention and having patience, you can figure out ways to reach your child and express the love he/she so deserves to feel from you.

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