

## **Ten Ways to Love Your Children**

### **By David Feddes**

We're going to look at ten ways for fathers and mothers to love our children. I don't claim to offer a complete list or to present them in any scientific order. These aren't mechanical, step-by-step instructions on how to build the perfect child. They're some basic ideas, grounded in the Bible and confirmed by experience, that serve as check points to help you as a father or mother to evaluate and improve your love for your children.

#### **1. Love your children by loving your spouse.**

The best context for healthy children is healthy marriage. When you love your wife or husband, your kids enjoy an atmosphere of love and security. When they see Mom and Dad hugging and kissing each other, encouraging and complimenting each other, doing things for each other, kids feel great! They know Mom and Dad are devoted to each other no matter what, and it gives them a sense of stability and confidence. The Bible connects a flourishing marriage with flourishing children when it says, "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table" (Psalm 128:3).

Few things are more necessary for children growing up than a loving home and a stable marriage. When kids feel a tension between Dad and Mom, it troubles them. If Mom and Dad split up, it tears the children apart. One tragic irony of our time is that some countries have outlawed spanking as child abuse, and yet many nations have no-fault divorce laws and allow couples to live together without marriage and then abandon one another as they please. Talk about child abuse! What could be more cruel to children than breaking up the home? Their foundation crumbles, and there's no atmosphere of love for them to flourish in. One great way to love your kids is to love your spouse!

#### **2. Love your children by meeting their physical needs.**

Make sure your kids have food, clothing, and a place to live. This is almost too obvious to need saying, but it's too important not to say. Some of you have already blown the first guideline and then, once you've broken up with your partner, you make matters even worse by not paying child support. You've already hurt your children emotionally, and now you won't even help to meet their physical needs. Wake up, deadbeat! The Bible says: "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8).

Then again, maybe you're not a deadbeat. Maybe you work long and hard to provide for your children. If so, be encouraged. If you're a parent earning a paycheck in a job that isn't much fun, look at it not just as a drag but as a God-given means to provide for the children you love. The same is true when you toil at home preparing meals and washing clothes and changing diapers. Don't see it simply as a bore and a chore. See it as a privilege, a real and concrete way to love. Love your children by gladly working to meet their physical needs.

#### **3. Love your children by getting your own act together.**

Your attitudes and actions have a strong effect on your children. If you are thoughtful and gentle, it warms your kids' lives and also sets an example for them to become thoughtful and gentle people. If you are selfish and angry and nasty, it makes their lives painful and bitter, and it also sets an example for them to become nasty people themselves. If you choose a way of life

that is wholesome, it brings them wholesomeness. But if you get into alcohol and drugs, it poisons not only your life but theirs as well. They are hurt by your harmful habits, and to make matters worse, they are likely to pick up your bad habits themselves.

Being the father of a family is like being in charge of a ship. If you steer the ship safely to its destination, you not only make it there yourself but you take others with you. But if you don't know what you're doing or where you're going and you sink the ship, you will not only ruin yourself but the others in the ship with you. A ship's captain who won't study maps or pay attention to warnings will endanger himself and everyone with him. Likewise, a father who ignores the Bible's directions and warnings will not know how to steer himself and his family through the icebergs, rocks, and storms of life. He puts his own soul and their souls in jeopardy of disaster. Get to know the Bible yourself so that you can steer your family to safety.

So, for your own good and the good of your family, get your act together. Get rid of bad habits and poisonous attitudes, and seek to be a person of wisdom. The Bible says, "By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasure" (Proverbs 24:3-4). In other words, if you get your act together and live wisely, your household will prosper.

#### **4. Love your children by loving God.**

If you don't have a relationship to God, you are an obstacle to your children's relationship to God. Even if you're a fairly good parent in other respects, you are hindering and harming your child's eternal soul (along with your own soul) if you don't know God or love him.

On the other hand, if you love and trust and worship the Lord, if you have a living relationship with Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Master and Friend, then your relationship with the Lord will inspire you to be an excellent parent and will also attract your children to want a relationship to God like the relationship you have.

One of my favorite Bible verses as a father is Proverbs 14:26, "He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge." When you have the deepest respect and love for God, it becomes a wall of safety and protection for your children. When you live by faith in God's covenant promises, those promises embrace your children, too. So if you don't know the Lord Jesus, get to know him. And if you do know the Lord, then love him with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. God will be honored, and your children will be blessed along with you. Love your children by loving God.

#### **5. Love your children by trusting God to complete his work in their life and yours.**

Your kids are still a work in progress, and so are you. Keep that in mind. When your child blows it, don't panic. And when you blow it yourself, don't give up. Your children have a long way to go, and so do you, but God has his ways of eventually getting you to where he wants you to be. The Bible tells people who are still far from perfect, "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

It's okay to have high expectations of our children and of ourselves. But don't be demanding without being understanding. Even God himself, though he is perfect and requires total perfection, has compassion for us in our weaknesses. The Bible says, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:13-14).

God won't be fully satisfied until we are perfect, but in the meantime, he knows our weakness, and he is pleased at every sign of progress. That is God's attitude, and it should be

ours, too. Don't be too hard on your children. Don't be too hard on yourself. Don't turn every problem into a unchangeable catastrophe. Don't panic. Pray. Be patient with failings, and be grateful for every little bit of progress. We haven't turned out yet, but by God's grace we will. We and our children aren't perfect, but instead of letting imperfections throw us into despair, let's rest in a Savior who *is* perfect and is perfectly able to make us and our children perfect in his own good time. Let's love our children by praying for them and trusting a loving God to complete his work in their life and in ours.

## **6. Love your children by being there for them.**

It may not sound impressive, but one of the most basic ways of loving your kids is simply showing up! That's right. Even if you're far from perfect, you're well on the way to being a good mom or dad simply by showing up and spending time with your children instead of being elsewhere.

Just showing up at mealtime can help a lot. Only six percent of kids who eat dinner with their parents six or more times a week smoke compared with 24 percent of those who eat dinner with their parents twice a week or less; for marijuana use, it's 12 percent compared with 35 percent. You don't have to be a hero or a genius to sit down with your kids at mealtime. Just do it. Otherwise your kids will be three to four times more likely to get into harmful habits. If you simply show up every day and share some food and conversation, you can make a huge difference in your kids' lives.

Having meals together or playing games or talking or reading with your kids may seem like little things—they certainly aren't things that require a degree in psychology—but these “little things” make a big impact. They are rich treasures for a child's heart and soul.

At times, in fact, you don't have to do anything at all except be in the same house. Even when your children aren't doing something with you, even if they're off in another part of the home on their own, just your presence in the house makes them feel rooted and secure and cherished. They may not need you at the moment, but they know you're available. In other words, a great deal of parenting isn't about ability but availability. You don't have to be an expert; you just have to show up.

The flip side of this is that if you're not available, if you don't show up, if you're constantly away from your children, if you don't even have meal times and evenings with them, then any parenting stuff you do manage to squeeze in may be a waste. The Bible says, “Like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home” (Proverbs 27:8). Absentee parenting doesn't work. You can't run a home by phone, fax, and email. Love your kids by being with them as much as you possibly can.

## **7. Love your children by getting your priorities straight.**

What really matters to you? Where do you focus your greatest effort and energy and concern, on having more stuff or on building better relationships? We saw earlier that providing for physical needs can be a way to love your children, but providing for physical needs is not the same as constantly chasing more wealth and luxury. The Bible says bluntly, “A greedy man brings trouble to his family” (Proverbs 15:27).

Living with less luxury and healthier relationships to God and family is better than lifestyles of the rich and famous with rotten relationships to God and family. The Bible makes this point again and again in the book of Proverbs: “Better to be poor and fear the Lord than to be rich and in trouble. Better to eat vegetables with people you love than to eat the finest meat where there is

hate” (Proverbs 15:16,17 TEV). “Better to eat a dry crust of bread with peace of mind than have a banquet in a house full of trouble” (Proverbs 17:1 TEV).

You don’t need the fanciest food and the biggest house and the hottest car to be happy. Your kids don’t need tons of toys or gobs of gadgets or closets of costly clothes to be happy. Living at peace with each other, loving each other, honoring the Lord and enjoying his favor—these are better than anything money can buy: better for you, and better for your children. Love your children by getting your priorities straight.

### **8. Love your children by disciplining them firmly and fairly.**

If you discipline your children, they may sometimes accuse you of hating them and being mean to them. But what does God say in the Bible? God says it’s hateful not to discipline. Proverbs declares, “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him” (Proverbs 13:24).

There are misguided experts who push permissive parenting and say that all spanking is child abuse. But God says it’s abusive *not* to punish your children for disobedience and sin. “Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death” (Proverbs 19:18).

Spanking isn’t the only way to punish children, especially older ones, but it certainly is one time-tested, Scripture-approved method of sound and effective discipline. A motto I heard (and sometimes felt) as a boy was, “If you can’t hear it with the ear, you’ll feel it through the rear.”

Some people oppose spanking and equate it with abuse. Why? Sometimes it’s because they have a sentimental view of children. They think children are sweet and pure by nature. Dads and moms shouldn’t make rules or punish their kids; they should just give them what they want, let them do as they please, and watch those marvelous little people blossom. Some experts may promote this, but sensible people call it “spoiling kids rotten.”

In contrast to such sentimentality and permissiveness, the Bible bluntly says, “Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him” (Proverbs 22:15). Kids aren’t just sweet and wonderful. Sometimes they’re bad. Foolishness runs deep in their hearts and can even destroy their souls if it’s allowed to go unchecked. That’s why discipline must be firm, even painful at times.

However, discipline must also be fair. The Bible says, “Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged” (Colossians 3:21). Never spank your child when you aren’t in full control of your temper, or the spanking can become abusive. Punishment must be for the good of the child and must be appropriate to the offense. If you punish a child to vent your rage, and if the punishment is out of proportion to what the child did, it is abusive.

Still, not all spanking is abusive. There’s a world of difference between a carefully applied, well-deserved spanking and an angry beating. The best alternative to abusive discipline isn’t *no* discipline but *firm, fair* discipline.

Kids may gripe about punishment, even when it’s fair, but they know they are loved. Kids who aren’t disciplined figure that their parents are either spineless or clueless—or, even worse, they figure their parents just don’t care. Do you want your kids to think you don’t love them enough to care what they do? The Bible says, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love” (Proverbs 27:5). A parent who scolds or spansks when necessary shows more love than one who says and does nothing.

If a child has no parents to exercise authority, no rules or boundaries to respect, no punishment to learn from, that child will most likely grow up confused, unhappy, and immoral.

But if mom and dad set well-defined borders and care enough to punish and correct bad behavior, the child develops a sense of order and wellbeing under the steady guiding hands of loving parents. “Discipline your son,” says Proverbs 29:16, “and he will bring you peace; he will bring delight to your soul.” Love your children by disciplining them firmly and fairly.

### **9. Love your children by trying to make them wise.**

Don’t just try to drive folly out of them through discipline. Pour wisdom into them through teaching and example. With God’s help, seek to be a resource of wisdom for your children to draw from. A biblical writer says in Proverbs 4, “When I was a boy in my father’s house ... he taught me and said, “Lay hold of my words with all your heart... Get wisdom, get understanding.”

Part of making your kids wise is helping them avoid things that will make them foolish. A person in the Bible wrote, “I will walk in my house with blameless heart. I will set before my eyes no vile thing... No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house” (Psalm 101:2-3,7)? I know a father who taped a sign above his TV which said, “I will set before my eyes no vile thing.” That affected the man himself and kept him away from most of the programs he had been watching. When his kids first saw the sign, they complained, “Dad, get rid of that. It interferes with our TV watching.” The dad replied, “That’s what it’s supposed to do!”

Don’t stand idly by as your children spend their time at home filling their minds with TV programs and trashy music and computer games. And don’t assume that it’s up to the school or even the church to make your children wise. It’s not just their job; it’s yours. The Bible tells *parents* to instruct children in the ways of the Lord. It’s very important to take them with you to a good church and provide them with an education that shows them how to live for God, but in all of this, always remember that you are their main teacher.

If you love your children, make your own words count. Tell them the great stories and events of the Bible, and instruct them in the truths and commands of God. Also, whenever possible, tell stories of how the wisdom of the Bible has been confirmed in your own life. Some of the stories may be inspiring, some funny, some frightening, some embarrassing, some all at once. Children love to hear stories, and they especially like lively, true stories rooted in their own family history. It shapes their understanding of who they are and often confirms that good things happen when we follow God’s wisdom and bad things happen when we don’t.

As you try to instill wisdom in your children, remember to share the wisdom of humility. When they ask questions you can’t answer, don’t be afraid to admit you don’t know it all. When you blunder, be honest about it. When you lose your temper or neglect your children or wrong them in some other way, tell them you’re sorry and ask their forgiveness. Will this decrease your authority in their eyes? No, it will increase it. Your kids are smart enough to know you’re not perfect. If you’re smart enough to admit it, if you’re humble and honest when you’re wrong, your children will be more ready to hear your wisdom when you are right, and they’ll also be encouraged to look beyond you to Jesus himself as the supreme source of wisdom. Love your children by seeking to make them wise.

### **10. Love your children by prizing them enormously.**

I mention this last, but it’s definitely not least. The Bible says children are a reward from God (Psalm 127:3). Because that’s true, delight in your children and value them as priceless gifts from God. Do you relish and rejoice in your children? Are you thrilled to have them? Kids can tell, you know. They can tell whether they are a joy to their parents or just a chore.

Prizing your children is crucial to the other things you do as a parent. Without really prizing and being crazy about your kids, the time you spend with them will be a bore, the discipline you apply will seem heartless, and the wisdom you try to share will taste like hideous medicine. But when you prize your children—their smiles, their ideas, their achievements, their uniqueness—they will sense it, and all your other ways of showing love will gain added power. The more you prize your children, the more likely it is that they'll become people who are indeed worth prizing. As Proverbs puts it, "The father of a righteous man has great joy; he who has a wise son delights in him. May your father and mother be glad; may she who gave you birth rejoice!" (Proverbs 23:24-25) Whatever you do, love your children by prizing them enormously.

There you have it: ten ways to love your children. As you've heard these ten items, you may have felt affirmed on some things and thought, "I'm already doing that, and I feel encouraged." If so, I'm glad for you. Keep it up! At other points, you may have thought, "Ouch! I've really blown it there." If so, ask the Lord to forgive you and help you to change and do better.

God bless your children, and God bless you in loving them.