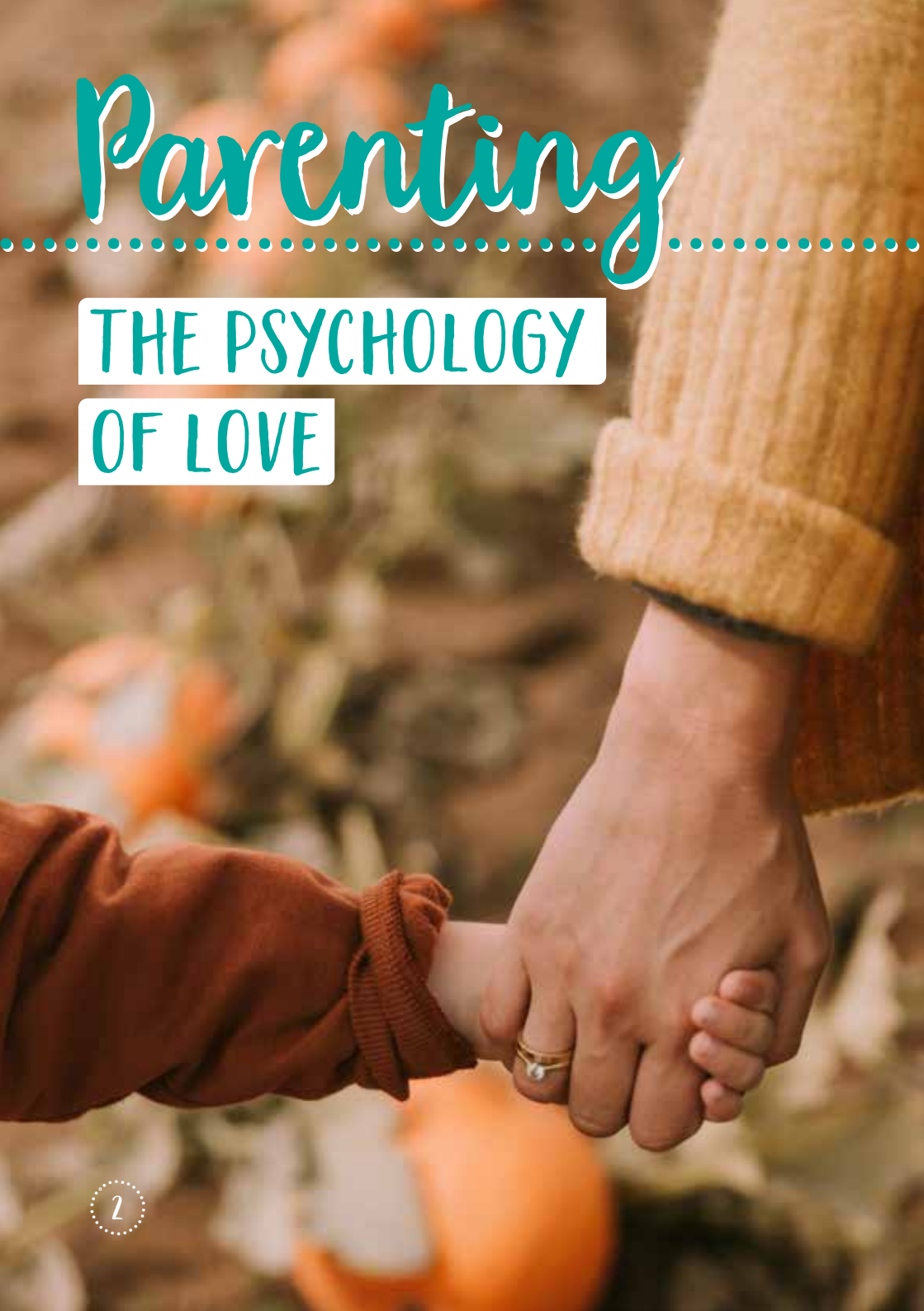


# Parenting



## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LOVE

If we said, “Unmet emotional need is a major cause of behavioural and learning problems, and wise love can fix it”, some people would groan and say, “How obvious” or “How twee”. But even they wouldn’t realise how true it is.

For example, classroom studies show that children under emotional stress achieve far below their potential. If a child still feels sad because Mum and Dad fought last night, how can you expect them to concentrate on geography? If they feel like dirt because someone has bullied them in the playground or online half an hour ago, how can they feel confident enough to keep trying that maths problem that already seemed hard?



*Study after study is showing that one major preventative against delinquency is the good quality of relationship children have with their parents (or a parent figure).*

This research is dynamite! It has been very unpopular because it seems to put the blame on parents. Of course, it's unproductive to burden well-intentioned parents with more guilt and unfair to blame them for their children's choices or their peers. But it's time to give dads and mums a serious wake-up call: You're needed! You're important!

## What does quality of relationship mean?

It means warmth, acceptance, safety and heart-to-heart closeness. It means feeling wanted, liked, valued, included, needed, informed, consulted. It means a child can talk about problems without expecting the Inquisition.

A good relationship builds self-esteem like nothing else. This requires both unconditional love and earned approval.

*Unconditional love* is being loved just for being you and being here. You don't have to earn or deserve it and you can't ever destroy it—in fact it loves you just as much when you've just made a mistake. "I just like you coz you're you."

*Earned approval* is being praised when you do good things or display likable qualities. When you get a high mark, shoot the winning goal, win an award or look really good, it tells you. It affirms you. Children need this as well. If they receive only unearned love, they can feel a bit lethargic. One child said, "Aw, Mum, you'd tell me I was good even if I was dumb." That's good from one angle, but the child also needs to know the specifics of what people like about them.

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## How do you do this?

I know a dad who decided to ask his children a risky question. He chose the right moment and asked his eight-year-old son, "Do you know that I love you?"

His son asked, "Are you OK, Dad?"

He said, "Yeah, I'm serious."

His son replied, "A bit."

The dad was horrified, but stayed neutral. "Well, how do you know that bit?"

The boy paused and said, "When you fixed my computer." The father kept quiet. "And when you took me to work with you in the school holidays."

The father thought about that, and realised that help and time made his son feel loved. That was hardly rocket science, but he had to admit he didn't do much of it.

"OK, son," he said. "What else can I do?"

The son freely suggested a few things, quite touched that his dad was trying. The father, to his credit, changed plans and took his son go-kart racing. He started inviting him to come with him on various errands to the hardware store and the mechanic. His son simply wanted to have Dad around more!

The same father went to his 13-year-old daughter and asked her the same question. She looked down her nose at him and said, "What? I don't know!" He got the feeling that she was checking whether he really wanted to know and whether it was safe to tell him. He gently and politely persisted. Eventually he found the right question: "When was the last time you knew I loved you?"

She took her time to reply, "I don't know . . . maybe when I won the 200-metre and you said I was a good sportswoman."

She said it in a half-mocking, too-cool-to-care tone, but it was the truth. She obviously liked being appreciated and noticed.

He said, "Well, I do love you a lot and I obviously need to show it better. How could I do that?" He saw her mask slip for a minute and she actually told him what she wanted. "I wish you had more time to take me more places."

"OK," he said. And to his credit, he actually followed up. The next weekend, he drove her to a friend's party and even drove her to school a couple of mornings that week. He says the result was they started talking about her music, her friends, her entertainment, her ambitions—her life. He realised he had barely known her, but started to appreciate what a great kid she really was. He didn't come on heavy with the advice, and so eventually she started asking his opinion.

If only it were always that easy. Not all children are that easy to get back in touch with. Some have been hurt and closed down for years. Some parents have simply assumed that the children must feel loved, just because they know they feel love for them. There are only five basic ways human beings give and receive love, and each individual has one or two that really fill their love tank. The trick is to find these for your children.

*(See our Relationships course, "Intimacy and sex", where these principles are applied to marriage.)*



# Five ways to show love

## 1. Words of affirmation

For example, “You ran really well at the park”, “You were nice to look after your little sister”, “You’re a good kid”, “You’re a pretty little angel”.

Your words can let your children know you love them and can make them love you. Make sure they are tailor-made words that notice what’s so good about them as individuals. Even when teenagers seem to “go underground” emotionally for a while and don’t respond, it’s still wise to keep giving in this way.

With young children, you can play the “I like how you . . .” game. You have to tell them something you like about them, then they tell you one they like about you. You’ll get some great ones back. (“You have nice white teeth like a wolf.” “You’re the funniest.”) And you can throw outrageous compliments at them. This game is a fun way to get a family showing love.

## 2. Quality time

There is no substitute for this, no-one else can do it for you and no product you can buy will replace it. We parents are tempted by excuses like, “We don’t spend much time, but we spend quality time.” Really, what does that mean? Children can’t be scheduled: “OK, it’s 8 pm, so we need to drop what we’re doing and get all relaxed and open-hearted with Dad for 20 minutes.” It doesn’t happen like that. Unstructured time is often the most productive for questions, deep talks and bonding. Building a friendship takes time—relaxed time just to horse around.

Psychologist Steve Biddulph goes hard and specific on this point: “If you routinely work a 55-hour or 60-hour week, including travel times, you just won’t cut it as a dad [or mum]. Your [children] will have problems in life and it will be down to you. Fathers [and mothers] need to get home in time to play, laugh, teach and tickle their children.

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"Often fathers find that the answer is to accept a lower income. . . . Next time you're offered a 'promotion' involving longer hours and more nights away from home, seriously consider telling your boss, 'Sorry, my children come first.'"

You know he's right. What are you going to do about it? And don't say you'll start next week.

*When you do spend time with your children, what do they want?*

#### **FOCUSED ATTENTION**

The other day in a playtime with my daughter, I got to thinking about work. A couple of minutes later I noticed she had wandered off. She must have gotten bored with a dad who wasn't really there. I went after her and said, "Sorry, honey, I was thinking about work, but I've stopped." I gently got into what she was doing rather than demanding that she snap to attention now that "his lordship" had come back. Soon we were having a ball again.

#### **ENERGY**

It's not enough to use all your energy at work and be sleepy or grumpy at home. Researchers hear children saying that this is the biggest thing.

#### **LISTENING**

Don't forget eye contact and act on some of the suggestions you hear.

#### **ONE-ON-ONE TIME**

It's great to play with all your children together, but mix in some time with each alone. Then they can tell you their particular problems.

#### **CONVERSATION SKILLS**

A lot of people put on a charming face for strangers, but are grumpy at home. Charm your family. It's easier the earlier you start. They are most flexible when they're not yet at school, and starting early gets you in the habit of putting family time above work or other commitments.

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### 3. Gifts

It doesn't have to be a convertible (either doll-size or adult-size). This is not about breaking the bank, it's about them feeling remembered. A tiny gift, like a cuddly kiwi or koala from your trip, means, "Mum thought of me while she was away."

### 4. Acts of service

Some children say the most loved they ever felt was when their mum cooked them their favourite meal or their dad helped them do up an old car or their parents took turns being by their bed when they were sick for a week. These are ways to show how much you feel for your children.

Are they demanding and exhausting? Absolutely. When children try to say they love you by doing acts of service, it's important to appreciate them. Even if you didn't want toast and baked beans for breakfast or your car windows washed with a slightly dirty rag, be grateful.

### 5. Physical touch

You may have heard about orphanages after World War I where babies who had everything—food, cleanliness, health care—simply shrivelled up and died. Researchers worked out that they were lacking hugs, touch and physical affection. That is now seen as a basic need for children. (I think it's vital for adults as well.)

There are so many ways to touch children appropriately. Pat them on the back, massage their feet and shoulders, stroke their hair or face, tickle them, carry them around, swing them round the lawn, sit cuddled up in bed reading, watch TV with them sitting on your knee or leaning on your legs, brush their hair, give them horsey rides on your back, rumble and wrestle them. A friend of ours often spends holidays in Romanian orphanages as a "hugger", working to care for young children all day. She speaks little of their language, but says it's an extremely satisfying job. Tiring too.

I hug children—my own and other people's. These days it can be misunderstood because people are so worried about abuse and you need some clear rules:

- Only if they invite it. You can ask, "Would you like a hug?" (If they say no, that's fine too.)
- In public, not in private.
- More side-on than front-on if they are older.
- In groups, not selectively.
- As a playful wrestle if they're older boys.

I'll never forget working with a young woman who had been sexually abused. She realised she couldn't remember a "proper hug", and asked for one from me. I felt this was not exactly a textbook way to behave, but I hugged her on a busy street. She said, "It was nice to be hugged by someone who doesn't want to take something from me."



## Stupid love (Of course there are some love imitations around.)

**Seductiveness and crossing sexual boundaries.** You may rationalise that they don't understand, that you are just giving children safe experience or teaching them, or that they started it, but that would be kidding yourself. Sexual play with children is violating their trust and doing serious long-term damage. Even if they do act seductively or even come on to you sexually, you are the adult, legally and morally obliged to act responsibly. If you are crossing boundaries, stop before it gets worse. Seek help from a counsellor urgently.

**Clinginess and smothering.** These might make a parent feel oh-so-loving and wonderful, but they carry a message that the child is weak, useless and needy. Many children get frustrated and rebellious, while others become dependent under this kind of love.

**Performance-based love.** Some parents find it hard to like children when they are disobedient, weak, sick or unsuccessful at something. Perhaps they have been raised to feel that they are lovable only when they are doing well. This is not balanced love. You may need to seek counselling about it yourself.

**Manipulative love.** "I will love you if . . ." These words may never actually be said, but the child is made to feel that love is conditional on behaviour. This makes them less secure and more likely to tell you where to go with your approval.

### LET'S LEAVE THE LAST WORD TO AN EXPERT ON PREVENTING ADDICTION:

**"The child's foremost need is an adequate supply of wise love. By 'wise' I mean steady and natural, instead of sporadic and forced; unsentimental and geared to growing autonomy [independence] instead of plaintive [needy and pleading] and smothering."**

*David Roberts, Psychotherapy and the Christian View of Man, quoted in Howard, Clinebell, Understanding and Counselling Persons With Alcohol, Drug and Behavioural Addictions.*



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**Published by:** HopeChannel

**Printed by:** Signs Publishing Company, Warburton, Victoria, Australia.