

Teaching Children to Love

Love is a natural emotion within families and yet God knew that even in intimate relationships we can't just settle for what comes naturally, but must be taught to love (Titus 2:4). God aspires for us to have a kind of love deeper and more practical than anything we can achieve without instruction (I John 3:18)

The Bible makes very clear the priority God places on love in our lives and characters. In Mark 12:28-31, Jesus tells us that the most important command is to love God and the second is to love others. John 13:34-35 tells us that love is the evidence upon which the world judges our connection to Christ. Romans 13:10 says that love is the fulfillment of the law. In I Corinthians 13:13 Paul asserts that love is more important than faith and hope, and earlier in the same chapter, he says that any other spiritual offering in the absence of love is worthless, a somewhat shockingly ponderable truth. Love is the very DNA of God and it is love that makes us resemble Him as His children (Ephesians 5:1-2).

There are several reasons why love must be taught rather than instinctively experienced.

1. **The world offers a wrong definition of love.** It suggests that love is a bit outside of our control; that it just happens, that we fall into and out of it. As a result, we only love the lovable—certainly not what Jesus taught. He called us to imitate Him in loving unconditionally, even loving our enemies.
2. **Love is not equivalent to sentimentality.** Almost from the first day toddlers start socializing, they identify people they do and don't like. In their purity, they gravitate toward those who are happy, unselfish and fun. In their selfishness, they gravitate toward anyone who lets them have their own way. As parents, before we can teach love to our children we must be clear about our own expression of love. Often we mistake sentimentality for love—a gooiness that never truly meets needs. Sentimentality protects the wrong things. It seeks to protect against discomfort, embarrassment and consequences, thus crippling character development. Real love has clear boundaries, reasonable expectations of responsibility and an acceptance of consequences. This produces a strong and beautiful character.
3. **Affection does not constitute love.** It is easy for human beings to isolate one aspect of love and assume they've got the whole package. Affection is an important way to display love: hugging, kissing, romping and laughing are wonderful, and vital to the development of an emotionally healthy child. Paul gives us a clue into the wider parameters of true godly love in his prayer for the disciples at Philippi: "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness...." (Philippians 1:9-10). What a great summary for the prayers and practical goals of every Christian parent. It surely does take the loving insight that

comes from God to see what our children, each with their own unique personalities and sinful natures, need in order to grow into righteous adults!

4. **Real love breeds wisdom.** Wisdom and love are often thought to be separate qualities, but wisdom is a key aspect of godly love. Godly love sets aside pride, seeking wisdom through the vulnerability of asking advice (James 3:17) Wisdom allows the truth of God's word to supplant instincts and experience and philosophies. It is sometimes hard to admit we don't have all the answers when it comes to our children, but we must learn and demonstrate this kind of godly love in order to teach our children to be loving.

How do we teach this complex and essential quality to our children?

Start early. Teach toddlers to be warm, outwardly focused, to greet others with a smile and with eye contact. Practice this in brief family times and expect it of them in welcoming guests into your home or addressing people at church and other social settings. Let your babies be part of sandwich hugs as you fellowship. Make it a high priority to demonstrate love before your children. This will include your service and spiritual outreach to Christians and non-Christians alike.

Have at the forefront of your heart the aspects of love from I Corinthians 13:4-7. Equipped with God's own definition of love, you will be able to identify in your child's behavior what is and is not love. Watch for opportunities to teach these elements to your children as you observe them interacting within your family and without. Praise your children when they display love. Talk about it on the way to and from social occasions. Your children will come to understand the importance of love by your repeated focus on it. Children do not come into the world with the qualities of love as a part of their character. Babies focused on having their own needs met. To truly care about the people around them, they must be taught to rise above their own instincts and personalities.

“Love is patient”... with situations and with people. A child's tendencies to be demanding and easily frustrated must be addressed first with instruction and then with discipline. They will not simply outgrow this impatience; it must be part of consistent training. Teach them patience in sharing their toys, in waiting their turn, in accepting correction. It takes the patience and consistency of daily input on the part of parents to impart these lessons.

“Love is kind.”The natural “nah nah nah nah” tendencies of childhood are unkind. The innocent beginnings of insensitivity: “Why is your nose so big?” are more than just an embarrassment to parents, they are opportunities for parents to teach about feelings and our responsibility to care how our words and behavior affect others.

Kindness is an active quality. God-defined love is neither passive nor neutral; it seeks out the good it can do. Our culture is quick to call someone a “good” person if they have done no harm, and “kind” if they are friendly. God is not so dispassionate in His view of goodness and kindness. Consider I John 3:18, which says: “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”

Providing opportunities for actively practicing positive behavior is possibly even more important than correcting negative behavior. When our family was young we frequently took our children to help clean for or deliver meals to the sick, help people with moves, offer condolences to the bereaved, give rides to the stranded, baby-sit for parents needing a break. Now our small group Bible talk regularly visits a nursing home, telling our children their job there is to “collect smiles”. We talk about the effects of loneliness and boredom and how the simplest kindness could be the highlight of someone’s day. We watch our children grow in confidence in unfamiliar circumstances and become increasingly gregarious and compassionate as they are trained in this atmosphere. These proactive kindnesses give us the perfect training ground to converse with our children about how to serve, and how to be sensitive to the needs of others. Afterward we have the opportunity to praise them for their success in making others happy, referring back specifically to interactions they have experienced.

"Love does not envy..." How very early envy is displayed! Haven’t you seen children completely disinterested in a toy until another child is playing with it? Isn’t this the basis of sibling rivalry: when one child perceives a brother or sister receiving attention or favor he covets for himself? Our efforts at helping our children delight in the good fortune of others will bless them for the rest of their lives; it will multiply their own happiness when they are able to “rejoice with those who rejoice” (Romans 12:15)

This concept of envy goes hand in hand with the problem of boasting. Most children will be prone to feel competitive and want to brag that they have a bigger, better, newer, more whatever. Parental guidance in the form of instruction and discipline provides the only early antidote to this kind of behavior. Once, when my son, Greg, was 4 or 5, I gave him a popsicle and he promptly marched into our front yard swarming with other children, saying: “Ha, ha! I have a popsicle and you don’t!” Because I was within hearing and had a significant stash of popsicles at the ready, I went out and took away his popsicle and passed out popsicles to the rest of the children. It was a great way for Greg to get a sense of how he made others feel and to walk in their shoes for a bit. It was an important practical lesson in love. So many parents allow sentimentality to override their need to teach this important lesson and do nothing, chalking it up to “normal” childhood behavior, or at most they gently scold: “Now, now, that’s not nice.” No child will be deeply impacted by such chiding. Sometimes a parent will simply require a child to apologize for rudeness. Apologies are always good, but often they stop short of really helping the child understand how it feels to be treated the way they have just treated someone. If we are going to help our children internalize the command of Jesus to “do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12), we can’t take shortcuts in training. They will neither understand nor be motivated to overcome thoughtlessness.

Admittedly public censure is a tricky task requiring much discernment. It is never the goal to punish by humiliation, so a mom or dad must be very careful. When in doubt, correct or discipline in private. But there are times when a public offense demands a public correction and this can prove to be beneficial for both the offender and the offended. It clarifies for all the proper boundaries of behavior.

“Love is not rude.” Cultural rules of etiquette, for the most part, do not have their roots in God-defined morality, but they can assist us in becoming other-centered people. It is not inherently sinful to eat with your hands rather than utensils, but in Western culture, it is not thoughtful to subject tablemates to this somewhat messy method. Rudeness is most often culturally defined, yet it provides a wonderful arena for Christian parents to teach their children humility and respect. A child who chooses the floor in order to give his seat to an adult, who doesn’t grab for the choicest piece of meat on the platter, who says “excuse me” when interrupting or burping or otherwise offending, is a child trained not to be rude. Unfortunately, parents often do not understand the place manners ought to hold in the character development of their children. Parents can sometimes disparage training in manners as the folly of the prudish or they are self-righteously scrupulous about etiquette while tolerating more serious breaches of morality. We all know parents who are dogmatic about the mandate to say “please” and “thank you” but who fail to be alarmed when their child refuses to obey or throws a tantrum.

“Love is not self-seeking.” Babies are born entirely self-seeking. It’s hard for a parent to know exactly when this selfishness ceases to be appropriate. Before discipline occurs for selfishness, teaching and training in other-centeredness is called for. Patiently going through the exercises of sharing a toy or giving a hug or coming when called, teach our children the self-control and self-denial needed to become an unselfish person.

In an outreach to underprivileged children every year, our daughter has her children choose from among their own playthings for toys to give away. Much conversation goes into helping the children think what these less fortunate children would really enjoy. In the end it is a lesson in love and sacrifice.

I remember a mother and son who visited our home many years ago. The son became particularly enamored of a toy rubber ball that belonged to one of my children. When it was time to go, the son was reluctant to leave the ball behind. His displeasure quickly escalated into a fit of rage. At that point, I could have asked my child to give away his toy, yet I realized that would be disastrous for our hysterical friend. It was far better for him to understand that his inappropriate demands would go unmet. Unfortunately, in an effort to make a peaceful exit, his mother promised to stop on the way home and buy him a “better” one. My heart sank for this little boy who, barring intervention, was destined to grow up believing that no behavior was off-limits for acquiring what he wanted, that he was entitled to whatever he desired, and that he should seek “better” possessions than his friends had.

“Love is not easily angered.” If parents are seriously motivated to teach their children to love, there is new urgency to be alarmed by temper tantrums: fits of rage are immature expressions of selfish, willful, out-of-control efforts at manipulation, the antithesis of loving. Parents are prone to look for explanations excusing such out of control behavior, most commonly: “He’s tired.” A parent who ignores or simply isolates (aka, time out) a child having a fit of rage teaches that child that the only way to handle overwhelming emotions is to let them play out until exhaustion ensues. That child will likely grow up believing (and, for lack of practice otherwise, experiencing) that they are victims of their

emotional impulses and that venting is the only effective coping mechanism in their repertoire. What a sad lifetime handicap to feel at the mercy of whatever emotion comes upon you! Children must be taught, for their own sake and for the sake of everyone else in their lives, present or future, that they do have the power to control their emotions. That control as children is externally imposed, but it teaches them that they do have the strength to express their feelings in a right way and it grows within them a self-control that will bless them for the rest of their lives. To impose control through discipline at an effective level, with consistency, parents need to possess a deep conviction about this until the negative behavior is overcome.

A child learns to manage anger, frustration, or a deemed-unfair set of circumstances, and to accept responsibility that their behavior affects others for the good or the bad. Immaturity longs to be an island unto oneself, never having to take into account another's perspective. Spiritual maturity mentally multitasks in assessing multiple consequences of behavior and speech. What a gift we give our children when we give them these tools of self-control and other-centeredness as early as possible! While no one is responsible for another's choices of action, we can be responsible for the way we make others feel. This is not about people-pleasing, but simply about being loving. This doesn't mean that a child should be taught to "stuff" their emotions instead of expressing them. It means they must be taught correct ways of expressing their feelings and to have a growing understanding of which emotions are reasonable in the face of their circumstances and which are not.

"Love keeps no record of wrongs." By and large, children are quickly forgiving, but there are some with a keen sense of justice (defined solely by them) who long for scores to be even. Mercy too often is a foreign concept to them. This goes hand in hand with the fact that love "does not delight in evil." Here is the source of much tattling: delighting in seeing another child reap the consequences of forbidden behavior. The tattler can feel a sense of superiority and abate the frustration of seeing another child "get away with something." It takes a very discerning parent to ferret out the heart motivation behind the tattling. Revealing the misbehavior of another is not wrong in itself. What matters is the motivation behind it. If the tattler has come to protect someone from danger or to speak on behalf of an underdog, parental intervention is appropriate. If the child has come from a sense of superiority or for praise from an authority, this should be handled differently. No parent will get this right every time. But it is good to have a perspective which allows for better discernment, since we all cannot be Solomon.

"Love always protects" Naturally, children are not equipped to be physically protective in most cases, but their hearts can be trained to think compassionately and protectively of others. My Mother told a story of going to kindergarten where indoor plumbing was a new and frightening experience for her. The school bathrooms were equipped (and this was 1920!) with toilets that flushed automatically. When one stood up, the seat would flip up triggering the flushing mechanism. This was so terrifying to her at 5 years old that she decided not to use this convenience anymore and it resulted in her one day standing in a puddle of her own making. She stepped delicately aside trying to avoid detection, but her teacher seeing the soggy evidence inquired who might be at fault. There ensued a long

silence until a classmate, sympathetic to her embarrassment, “protected” her by claiming responsibility for the misfortune. Perhaps lying is a poor trade-off for protection, but the heart was sweetly admirable.

A friend of mine, Joann, grew up in a small town in the 1930’s. Joann invited a playmate of hers to go with her family to church. The little girl said she could not because she did not own a pair of shoes. Joann’s family was in no position to supply this lack and Joann, herself, owned but one pair of shoes. She told her friend that it was okay, and she brought her friend to church, the both of them happily barefoot.

It’s always a pleasure to see children who are inclined to go out of their way to include the shy or “different” instead of playing it safe and hanging with the accepted crowd. Some children seem to come by this naturally and others need to be encouraged to put themselves in others’ shoes (or out of them like Joann), and protect others from the childhood “cruelties” of exclusion, teasing, name-calling and classroom whispers that alienate. It takes focus and work for a parent to teach their children to protect the dignity of others, but it will bless those children with humility and graciousness in their characters.

“Love always trusts.” Babies are born demanding that their needs will be met and, as good parents faithfully meet those needs, children grow increasingly secure and trusting. However, the innocence of childhood trust makes them especially vulnerable to being abused or being taken advantage of. Ironically, young children can tend to be terrified of completely innocuous people and circumstances and completely unfazed by the extremely dangerous. One of our oldest son’s first words was “drainjus” (dangerous). He learned this from my daily repetition as I ran after him yelling, “Noooooooo! Greggie, that’s dangerous!” as he climbed atop cabinets, ran toward the street, explored the fireplace opening, or poised his tricycle at the top of stairs, etc.

Some lessons of trust are difficult for both parent and child. When separation anxiety kicks in, it is a difficult period until the child learns to trust that Mom will return and that hysterical protests are unnecessary and unfruitful. Her absence is temporary and it’s good to enjoy new companions and activities without her. But often instead of allowing children to experience their fears and then learn that they are unfounded, parents (perhaps especially mothers) try to protect their children from “trauma” by avoiding leaving the child in the care of another or by over-consoling the distraught child. This can actually encourage insecurity by unintentionally confirming the validity of their fears in the mind of the child. It delays the growth of trust in the parent’s decisions affecting the child. This ability to trust may one day inform the child’s decisions to trust God. It takes discernment, vigilance, and lots of communication to teach a child proper boundaries of trust.

“Love always hopes.” Hoping for the best in others, allowing someone to be considered innocent until proven guilty—these qualities seem to come naturally in very young children, but still need to be fostered by parents. At some point in childhood, exposure to disappointment, the realities of people’s failures and sins, and the negative comments of

others will affect our children's judgments of others. Parents are wise who help their children to keep a pure and optimistic heart without being naïve about human failings.

Psychologists tell us that we judge others by their behavior and ourselves by our intent. It takes conscious effort to give others the benefit of the doubt, to put oneself in another's shoes and try to imagine the best motives they could possibly have had for unkind or thoughtless behavior. This is also a component of grace and forgiveness. Children are precocious in their ability to justify their own selfishness or rudeness and can be outraged at the same behavior in someone else. Good questions from a parent might be, "How would you feel if....?" "Why do you think Johnny did that to you?" "Can you think of any other reasons?" Teach our children to explore more gracious interpretations of others' failings than just the worst case scenario, such as, "He's mean and he doesn't like me!"

"Love always perseveres." Love is pure, strong and resilient in the heart of a child. With the development of all these other aspects of love it takes on a staying power that can outlast the disappointment and rise above the disillusionment that is to come with maturity. It must be why the Bible says, "Above all, love one another deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." (I Peter 4: 8)

It seems imperative for every Christian parent to keep the aspects of love at the forefront of their minds while training their children. We must give love the same priority that God does in order to equip our children to fulfill their God-ordained destinies. Paul asserted that "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love" (Galatians 5:6). If we strive to make love the pre-eminent quality in training our children, a multitude of other character traits will be addressed in their natures and we can be sure we have linked our hearts and theirs with God's. It's a focus He will surely bless.

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