

The choice of heart work: Love languages at home

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WHEN we think of Valentine's Day, we often think of flowers and grand gestures of love. But in a family, especially one with growing children, love develops with unique demands and emotional flow. It is listening after a long day, choosing patience during conflict, and showing up again tomorrow despite frustration. Love at home is not seasonal. It is "heart work".

One question parents often ask me is: Why does it suddenly feel like my child has changed and become more distant? The reassuring truth is this: conflict with parents is not a sign of failure. It is part of development. Longitudinal research on parent-child relationships shows that as children grow, especially from middle childhood into adolescence, conflict tends to increase slightly while closeness shifts, reflecting normal developmental change rather than relationship breakdown. Toddlers often assert independence through resistance, and school-age children test rules as their cognitive and social awareness expands.

This is where understanding love languages in parenting becomes powerful. The idea of "love languages" was originally introduced by counselor and author Gary Chapman as five primary ways people give and receive love: words of affirmation, quality time, physical touch, acts of service, and gifts. Over time, many family counselors and parenting educators have adopted this framework as a practical tool for observing emotional needs in children, while noting that it is a helpful lens rather than a formal diagnostic model.

The American Psychiatric Association notes that children who struggle with emotions may show patterns of defiance, arguing, or withdrawal when they cannot yet put feelings into words. Broader reviews of children's behavioral and emotional disorders emphasize that behaviors like refusal, arguing, or "shutting down" can function as avoidance or distress signals rather than simple misbehavior. When we see behavior as communication, love becomes a tool.

Observing your child closely is key. A child who seeks attention through tantrums may actually be asking for quality time. A child who clings may need reassurance through physical touch. A child who argues constantly may be seeking words of affirmation that they are capable and valued. Parenting educators working with Chapman's framework often describe these patterns as signs of an "empty love tank," reminding parents that children's bids for connection are signals, not manipulation.

Practically, expressing love daily does not require grand gestures. It requires consistency. Here are simple ways parents can meet children where they are:

- For children who value quality time, protect small rituals—five minutes of undivided play, a nightly story, or a walk together. When I came home from work, it would be pretend play time

for our toddlers. Meagan would always be ready with her “What’s your order, Mom?”

■ For those who respond to words, speak encouragement aloud. Research on positive reinforcement shows that warm, specific praise can build children’s self-esteem, confidence, and resilience over time. Try socioemotional learning toys that help both you and your child identify and manage emotions.

■ For children who feel love through acts of service, helping with homework or preparing a favorite meal communicates care and support. When Meagan was older, she would prepare her special concoctions of fruit shakes or stir-fry dishes to surprise us when we got home.

■ For those who need physical touch, a hug, handholding, or sitting close offers regulation and safety. Marcus loved my foot massages before going to bed.

■ For children who appreciate gifts, small thoughtful tokens like notes or drawings can become symbols of connection rather than material reward. When I travel for business, I used to leave one note for each child every day that I am out just to greet them a good day in school or a simple “I miss you.”

Global child-health organizations highlight how powerful this kind of steady, responsive love can be. Guidance on responsive caregiving emphasizes that when caregivers respond appropriately and consistently to a child’s emotional and physical needs, they lay the groundwork for healthy social-emotional development and long-term well-being. Such responsiveness is linked with lower risk of later mental health difficulties, including anxiety.

Parent-child conflict peaks not because love is lacking, but because growth is happening. The goal is not to eliminate disagreements, but to stay connected through them. Love languages give parents a practical way to stay anchored in connection.

Valentine at home, then, becomes less about romance and more about rhythm. As parents, our children will not remember every rule we enforced or every lesson we taught. But they will remember how it felt to be loved consistently. And that kind of love—the quiet, faithful kind—is the heart work that lasts for our family far beyond February.

Advanced Happy Valentine’s Day, everyone!