

The Greatest Gifts a Child Can Receive

How do you give your child the ability to succeed, to be emotionally secure and a person you can be proud of? How do you help them have the brightest future possible in this rapidly changing world? As parents, these are really good questions to reflect on but sometimes neglected with all the other distractions we face.

The pace of change in our lives is incredible. The world has become a smaller place through advances in transportation and communications in the last century and even more so in the last decade. Easy travel and the internet give us rapid access to one another. While it may be easier to connect with others on this planet, it is not any easier to connect with your children in your own home. A parent's life is more complicated than ever - sometimes at the cost to family relationships. The influences on children that challenge a parent's values and authority such as media, music, the internet and drugs offer many temptations. Parental supports such as religious organizations, schools, community groups may, for many, may be less of an influence than a generation ago. So what can a parent give a child? What is the greatest gift a child can receive? Love and lots of it! A child who feels loved has the best chance to succeed.

Love can be conveyed in many ways. When a child internalizes love, they value themselves and others. They know how to work with others, become good friends, partners and eventually good parents. When a child has learned their own limits from a loving parent, they can achieve more. They are realistic and learn good judgement. They can set limits with themselves and others. They know how to give and take. They do not allow others to take advantage of them. As parents, the greatest gifts we can give our children is love, which includes setting limits and negotiating some.

Express Your Love

How many ways can you express love to your child? The best and most direct way is, of course, to simply say "I love you." For some parents, saying it comes naturally. That is great. Keep saying it. Many fathers I have met have more trouble with saying the words out loud - especially to their sons. Some may worry it may make their child into a "wimp". I suspect the discomfort is more related to how they were raised by their own father and their own misguided sense masculinity.

Hugs, kisses, snuggling, handshakes, pats on the back, winks, stroking hair are all good non-verbal expressions of love. You can give a complement, say thank you, attend their school or community activity, say “I am proud of you”, tell them how much you enjoy being with them. Begin a conversation with an endearment like “sweetie” “kiddo” or what ever you have you call them when you feel affectionate toward them. There are millions of ways to express I love you. Challenge yourself to look for new ones.

Setting Limits and Negotiating

With a foundation of love, setting limits for your children says “I care enough to keep you from doing something that may hurt you.” In his book *Parenting the Long Journey*, CityLine TV personality and parenting expert, Joe Rich puts it this way: ‘In an atmosphere of anger, frustration and power struggles, limits or boundaries feel like punishment handed down from an authority figure. In an atmosphere of love, children will interpret and respond to your limits as they are: advice-giving, protection and caring.’”

Some limits that we set as parents are negotiable and some are not. Negotiating with your child is another act of love. A child will learn that their opinion is valued. They learn that they can have influence on decisions. They learn how to earn trust. They learn that when they act responsibly they can get more independence. Not only is negotiating a way to show you care about and respect your child, it is a great skill for them to learn for later in life.

Tips for Negotiating Limits

Here are some thoughts about negotiating limits from Joe Rich.

- Parents set limits because children can't
- Children have the right to negotiate
- Parents have the right to determine non-negotiable limits – if you end up worrying or losing sleep on one, make it non-negotiable
- If no limits are negotiable, children will rebel
- Don't waste time arguing about non-negotiable limits
- Negotiations take place between people who love each other
- Successful negotiations will revolve around your child's willingness to reassure you- earning your trust. For example coming home at the right time or calling home when leaving a party.
- Negotiate one item at a time. Build on successes.
- Negotiate well in advance when possible and if child asks at the last minute, feel free as a parent to say no.

- When a negotiated event results in the child holding their end of the bargain and being responsible, it can reassure a parent that the next one will most likely go well.

Parenting can be both a frustrating and a rewarding experience. As your children develop, new challenges emerge just when we feel we have found a way to deal with the last one. When we find loving ways to teach our children to be responsible to us and others and to love themselves, they are more likely to succeed, be emotionally secure and able to face whatever the future holds.