

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

Parenting can feel overwhelming as we navigate through the trenches, and the number of “experts” who volunteer to help us has exploded with the advent of social media and the worldwide web. Yet articles like these from Sarah Reik and Rob Guenther are a reminder that in some ways, the basics of parenting can be remarkably simple. Neither Reik nor Guenther claim to be an expert on parenting, but they’re in the trenches with us and have some valuable thoughts to share about their experiences.

—Nicole Balza

WHAT ARE THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A STRONG PARENT/CHILD RELATIONSHIP?

WHEN I initially set out to answer this question, my head was spinning. Thousands of books have been written on the topic of parenting. I believe we all would agree that our main goals as parents are to love our children unconditionally and to teach them about the unconditional love of God. For direction on where to go after that, I decided (with some trepidation as to what I might hear) to turn to the experts—my four children.

LOVING COMMUNICATION

My children had quite a few thoughts about the importance of communication in developing and fostering a strong parent/child relationship. Carson (16) said he likes knowing that if he shares what’s on his mind, we will listen and do our best to understand from his point of view. McKenna (14) said it’s important for her to feel safe and comfortable talking to us, knowing that she won’t get a lecture but we’ll discuss things calmly and respectfully. Braden (13) said he knows some parents who get angry and put their kids down, but he’s glad that the way we talk to him is “kind and encouraging.”

“EVERYONE SHOULD BE QUICK TO LISTEN, SLOW TO SPEAK AND SLOW TO BECOME ANGRY” (JAMES 1:19).

LOVING CONNECTION

The book *The 5 Love Languages of Children* lists five primary ways we can connect with our children to show them love. This is something we are intentional about in our family. Sharing *words of affirmation* is one

way to connect and clearly appreciated by my children as discussed above. Another way is through *giving gifts*—Braden loves when I run errands and randomly come home with a pair of shorts I think he’ll like. We make an effort to connect with all the children through *physical touch* (hugs, kisses, high-fives, cuddling on the couch), as this is a vital love language, especially when children are young. When asked what she thinks helps build a strong parent-child relationship, Julia (11) named the last two love languages: “I like that you support me and help me with what I do (*acts of service*), and I like when we have fun days together (*quality time*).”

My husband is a master at showing love through quality time. Just in the last two days he went golfing with Carson, helped McKenna practice shooting her bow, talked football with Braden, and spent time with Julia at her cross country run. He makes an effort to connect with them around their interests, and we’ve observed how it has led to strong bonds over the years.

“OVER ALL THESE VIRTUES PUT ON LOVE, WHICH BINDS THEM ALL TOGETHER IN PERFECT UNITY” (COLOSSIANS 3:14).

LOVING CORRECTION

McKenna shared that she likes that we’re not over-protective and we don’t have many rules. She sees that we give her and the other children freedom and independence, and she appreciates that. My husband and I have made it our goal to be trainers and guides as we come alongside our children to both model and teach

HAVE PARENTING QUESTIONS?

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what it looks like to lead God-pleasing lives. This does not mean there is a lack of boundaries, but we have taken very seriously the command not to frustrate our children intentionally. As much as possible we strive to allow natural and logical consequences to influence behavior rather than control or punish our children through anger or fear.

“FATHERS, DO NOT EXASPERATE YOUR CHILDREN; INSTEAD, BRING THEM UP IN THE TRAINING AND INSTRUCTION OF THE LORD” (EPHESIANS 6:4).

LOVING EXAMPLE

I was glad to hear that our children feel they have a positive relationship with us and could name reasons for that. It’s a testament to the grace of God, because we have not come anywhere close to living out these guidelines perfectly in our parenting.

We do have a perfect example, though. There are so many instances in the Bible of Jesus building relationships in this way. He made time for the people around him, listened to their needs, and spoke kind and encouraging words. He connected with them in love through tender touch, by taking interest in their lives and struggles, and by serving them. He came alongside people to correct their sinful behaviors and to point them toward forgiveness and the gift of salvation.

As you seek to build loving relationships with your children, look to the example of Jesus. Even more than that, look to the life and work of Jesus, whose love for us ensured that our relationship with our heavenly Father will be strong for eternity.

“SEE WHAT GREAT LOVE THE FATHER HAS LAVISHED ON US, THAT WE SHOULD BE CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD! AND THAT IS WHAT WE ARE!” (1 JOHN 3:1).



Sarah Reik; her husband, Dan; and their four children are members at Morning Star, Jackson, Wisconsin. Sarah serves as a counselor with Christian Family Solutions.

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“IT’S ALL about relationships.” That’s what I believe about pastoral ministry. We have a relationship with Jesus because of God’s great grace to us. Now it is our privilege to build relationships with others so that we can share Jesus with them. As one friend of mine described our role as Christians: “Our job is to build a bridge between our hearts and theirs so that Jesus can cross over from us to them.”

I believe the same is true of parenting. It’s all about relationships. As parents, our job is to build a bridge between our hearts and theirs so that Jesus can cross over from us to them. That’s all that will really matter in the end.

So, how do we build those relationships? I think of the three Ts of relationships:

1. Time: How do kids spell love? T-I-M-E. Time with anyone is what builds relationships. Whether it be between pastor and parishioner, husband and wife, or parent and child, time together builds a bond—time talking, time listening, time doing things together.

To that end, I take my boys out on “dad dates.” They don’t like the title as they equate the term “date” to romance, but I explain that I’m putting a date on the calendar for us to spend time together. We talk and listen—dad and son, one-on-one, usually at a fast-food restaurant (which is the incentive for them to go). The only rule: We have to answer each other’s questions honestly—both of us.

2. Talk: I read when an eight-year-old girl named Jessica was once asked “What is love?” she answered, “You really shouldn’t say ‘I love you’ unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget.” People do forget. We need to hear of God’s unconditional love for us often. The more we hear it, the more we believe it.

The same is true in our human relationships. Tell your kids that you love them no matter what they do and you always will. For my boys, when it’s appropriate, I also add, “And I’m proud of you.” Then I try to give specific reasons why. The more they hear it, the more they will believe it, and the more they will live up to it.

3. Truth: As long as you’re telling them things, be sure to tell the truth. Tell them, “I’m sorry,” when you mess up. An apology can go a long way in restoring a strained relationship. Tell them what they need to hear, when they need to hear it, but speak the truth in love.

Ultimately tell them *the* truth—that God is doing everything to keep his relationship with us strong. He sent his own Son to pay for our sin. He sends pastors, teachers, and parents—and sometimes our own kids—to assure us that we are forgiven. That truth motivates us to live for him and do all we can to strengthen the relationships we have with those around us.

In the end, it’s all about relationships. We know that we have a perfect relationship with God through Christ and his work for us. As we rejoice in that relationship, he helps us build stronger relationships with our kids.



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