

Grown-up Kids Need Your Love More than Ever

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The love we show our children in their early years has a powerful effect on their behavior, life choices and self-esteem. But parents sometimes forget that older children, including teens and those who have already left home, need just as much love.

With love comes self-esteem, the ability to live with criticism and the avoidance of self-destructive behavior. It can even keep kids healthy. In one Harvard University study, nearly 90% of the participants who did not feel loved as teenagers experienced a serious illness by midlife, while only 25% of those who had felt loved had a serious illness.

Lessons I've learned from my experience as a pediatric surgeon, father of five and grandfather of eight...

BE THERE

It's not enough merely to be present with your children -- you need to give them your full energy and attention.

Young children crave parental attention. Grown children are more likely to push their parents away. At the same time, they crave understanding and kindness. It's crucial for parents to reach out even when they're faced with apparent rejection.

Ask your kids what's happening in their lives -- do this often. Don't try to solve their problems for them. You don't even have to agree with what they're saying. There were lots of times when I didn't always approve of things our children were doing. When I

didn't approve, I let them know it. You can love your children and not like what they are doing. Just show them that you take them seriously and that their thoughts and feelings matter.

LET THEM GROW UP

Parents want more than anything to keep their kids safe. It's tempting to supervise their every move... bail them out of every difficulty... and protect them from the consequences of their own (sometimes immature) decisions. But safety isn't all there is to life. We should encourage kids to take chances and experience new things. That doesn't mean we should let children risk their lives, but they can't grow up until we stop being overprotective and allow them to make their own mistakes.

Example: One of our kids did brilliantly in school. I wanted him to go to college and have an incredible career. One day, he told me he wanted to go to auto mechanic school. It wasn't what I had imagined at all, but you can't make your child go to college. So, after serious thought, I said, "Go ahead."

As it turned out, he later went into law enforcement and ultimately graduated from law school. Today, he restores cars on his own time as a hobby. I learned an important lesson. If your kids have an interest, encourage them to go all the way -- even if it isn't something that you wish they would do. There's no telling where they'll wind up eventually.

DEFINE FAILURE

I've heard parents say to their kids things like, "You don't do anything right." I've seen cancer patients who grew up with so much criticism that they were even afraid to draw pictures as part of their therapy. Failure is a word with many different meanings, depending on the way a person experiences it. It can be a disaster or an opportunity -- or at the very least, the source of some great stories.

Always tell your children that there's a huge difference between experiencing a setback and being a failure as a person. They'll never live fully if they're always worried that they might fail.

Help your children understand that mistakes are part of growth and that it's possible to succeed even when things don't go as planned. It also is important to realize that there's immense pressure on kids to succeed in terms of money, job status, etc. But what about the more important kinds of success, such as generosity, honesty and happiness? Without these, all the money in the world doesn't add up to very much. If you are happy, you are successful.

LIGHTEN UP

Why are so many parents so serious all the time? One of the best ways to stay close to your kids -- and have fun -- is to stay young at heart. Identify with your kids, rather than feeling you have to be "grown up."

When something goes wrong in your children's lives, find ways to help them laugh at the situation (without embarrassing them). Share a similar story from your own life. Tell them about your mistakes... how ridiculous you felt... and how it now makes you laugh. At the same time, tell them how you resolved the problem and learned to do better.

Every so often, devote a few days to growing young with your kids. Do something they enjoy. Depending on their ages, it could be going to an amusement park or a concert. Enjoy their young adulthood with them. You can always take a nap when you get home