

Ask the
Family
Doctor

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— & —
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Help!

+ “Why don’t children come with an instruction manual?”

Parenting isn’t just intimidating—it can be downright scary! As parents, we’ve willingly taken on the responsibility of providing for our children’s nurture, safety, and well-being. And we’ve committed to doing that for a lot of years. Where *is* that instruction manual?

That’s where we come in. Together we have more than 80 years of experience in answering those 2:00 a.m. phone calls and seeing thousands of children in the clinic or ER. In these pages we’ll share a lot of what we’ve learned through those years—what to do, when to do it, and what to stay away from.

Between us we have seven children and seventeen grandchildren, so we’ve shared your midnight dilemmas and been where you are now.

Here’s how we recommend using this book. You can read it straight through, flagging the questions that apply to you and your child right now, or you can check out the topical index and read about a problem you’re currently facing. If you don’t find what you’re looking for, contact us at askthedox@yahoo.com, and we’ll help you find an answer.

Robert M. Alexander, MD—Pediatrician

Robert D. Lesslie, MD—ER Physician



*“I think we’ve got this parenting gig NAILED.”**

**Said no parent ever.”*

Lisa Maltby

Love Languages

+ *I don't understand my child,
and we're always knockin' heads! What can I do?*

Simpatico—“of similar mind or temperament.” Sounds good, doesn't it? And wouldn't that make parenting a lot smoother? That's a worthy goal, to be of similar mind with your children, to understand where they're coming from and what makes them tick.

For some of us, that seems to come easy. But for most, it requires intentional effort. Fortunately, some people have thought through this challenge and offered help that's based on logic and outcomes. One such person is Gary Chapman, and he's given us a solid framework in his book *The 5 Love Languages*. It begins with suggesting you take a hard look at yourself to see what makes *you* tick. Once you've done that, you can focus on your child and build a long-lasting bridge of understanding and communication. The same goes for your spouse or any significant other. But we're going to focus on how to better understand your five- or fifteen-year-old.

“Love is a choice
you make
every day.”

GARY CHAPMAN

We have limited space here, so we're just going to touch on Chapman's basic concepts. He outlines five types of “love languages”—ways we give and receive love. Each of us is unique, and while we have a primary love language, we might also have a blend with one or two others. These become manifest at an early age and remain with us throughout our lives. The key is to understand these five languages, identify which

of them most closely applies to us, and then work to see which of them most closely applies to our children.

Words of Affirmation

Right off the bat, we probably think of compliments when we see this one. And that would be correct. But there's much more to affirmation. Encouragement is an important part of it—"to inspire courage." And as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:4, "Love is kind." To show love, our words should be kind, gentle, and humble. How does your child respond to your words?

"All of us blossom when we feel loved and wither when we do not feel loved."

GARY CHAPMAN

Quality Time

This one is tough. "Quality" means giving someone your undivided attention. Sitting in a movie theater together doesn't get it, nor does talking while both of you are texting away on your smartphones. Quality means focused attention and conversation, when the two of you are sharing feelings, thoughts, experiences, hopes, and dreams. When was the last time you and your "problem child" went somewhere and spent time one-on-one? And what happened?

Receiving Gifts

Gifts can be visual symbols of love, and they don't have to be expensive. They just need to come from the heart. We're advocates of the adage "Don't give a child something they cry for," but this has nothing to do with that. It has everything to do with understanding that your child responds to symbols of your love, whether your gift is small but meaningful (maybe something he collects) or completely unexpected (like an outing for ice cream). It doesn't have to happen every day or every week, but if your child's love language is giving and receiving gifts, you have a lot of options and opportunities. When she gives you a gift, no matter the size or cost, stop what you're doing, think about it, and accept it as a demonstration of her love.

Acts of Service

With children, this love language is most commonly expressed by the fulfillment of household chores. This delegation comes most effectively through requests and not orders. Remember that love is a choice and not a command. If your child's love language is acts of service, he'll show his love through *servicing* you by completing his daily chores. You can do the same for him by helping with his chores or through small acts of service for him around the house. If children refuse to make their beds every morning, realize this might not be an act of rebellion or disrespect. It just might not be their love language. (Yet, that bed needs to be made, and that's another topic).

Physical Touch

Obvious, isn't it? Most of us like and want to be touched, and for many, this is their primary love language. Small pats or hugs convey our love. Study your child's body language and response to your touch. If this is her love language, you'll be able to tell. And if that's the case, understand that excessive physical punishment can have long-term and disastrous consequences. If your daughter is upset and crying, the most important thing she needs is your presence and a hug.

That's it—our summary of Chapman's five love languages. If you and your child have the same love language—quality time, as an example—you're probably not "knockin' heads." And if you don't know your own language or that of your child, it might feel like you're just two ships passing in the night.

It doesn't have to be that way. If this idea of unique love languages strikes a chord, we wholeheartedly recommend that you get a copy of Chapman's book and study it. What you learn about your child and especially about yourself might be a surprise.

Simpatico. Work on it and get there.

*"Remember that your ultimate goal is for your children
to grow up secure in your love,
strong in their faith,
and with sound character."*

Gary Chapman

Helicopter Moms and Aerial-Drone Dads

✦ *My sister says I'm a "helicopter mom,"
and I told her no way. Ahem. What's a helicopter mom?*

Groucho Marx is purported to have interviewed a mother of nine on his television show (circa 1950). When he learned how many children she had, he asked, "How in the world have you been able to manage so many kids without going crazy?"

"Well, it hasn't been easy. With our first child, my husband and I would rush him to the doctor with every snuffle, or scratch, or the slightest bruise. For a couple of months, we slept outside his door, listening for any change in his breathing or for any cough. He never left our sight. When number two came along, we did just about the same thing, except for sleeping outside her room. With number nine, it was different. One day when he swallowed a quarter, we just took it out of his allowance."

That story is a good example of the evolution of a "helicopter mom"—constantly hovering over her child—to a more relaxed yet competent parent. The term has been around for a couple of decades, but it's recently gained more attention. That might be because of its increasing incidence and the mounting evidence that it does more harm than good to a child.

Helicopter parenting refers to a style of being overly focused on our children, especially their perceived needs and specifically on their successes and failures. "Overparenting" is a way of describing it, referring to overprotecting and overcontrolling. The logical extension is to

become a “Black Hawk parent,” referring to the military assault type of helicopter. This would mean employing all opportunities and avenues to secure the most favorable outcome possible for your child regardless of the scorched earth left behind.

Another term for an overparenting parent is “lawn mower.” This is the mother or father who will mow down any obstacle, problem, frustration, or inconvenience that might stand in the way of their child and his or her success.

“We’re raising children who have little tolerance for disappointment.”

**AUTHOR
UNKNOWN**

“Cossetting” is a gentler term, implying that the parent wraps a child in cotton wool to protect them, but the goals and outcomes are the same. We like the term “smother” because it’s descriptive and kind of cute.

All these terms can be applied to the parent of a child of almost any age. Toddlers can be overparented, as well as middle-schoolers and teenagers. Now that this issue is being discussed more openly, there is growing concern that overparenting extends to our children’s college years and beyond.

Why do parents hover? Why do we feel compelled to overparent and overprotect? Most of the many reasons start in a good place and grow into something unhealthy. We worry about our child not succeeding—not making good grades in school, not excelling in sports or any other extracurricular activity, not getting into the right school or college, not getting the right job. We worry about her being disappointed and fear she might—heaven help us—fail in some endeavor. Some of us might have felt unloved or neglected when we were growing up, and we don’t want our child to feel that way. And sometimes we see other parents overparenting, and we feel pressured and compelled to do the same. What starts as good intentions can quickly turn into unhealthy actions.

✦ ***What’s unhealthy about wanting to protect my child?***

Nothing—until it becomes obsessive. Being involved with our

children gives them a sense of self-worth, love, and acceptance, but too much involvement deprives them of the chance to sort things out on their own. Instead of self-worth and self-confidence, we instill feelings of doubt and indecision. And when we don't allow them to fail, we deny them the chance to learn new skills that will help them handle challenges and failures—both of which they will face repeatedly throughout their lives. In addition to fostering a decreased self-confidence and self-esteem, overparenting prevents our children from developing constructive coping skills—handling the bumps in the road they will face every day. And recent evidence suggests that children who are overparented will have more anxiety and an increased risk for depression. On top of all that, the presence in the home of a helicopter mom or aerial-drone dad produces stress for all family members and increases the potential for marital discord.

✦ *Maybe my sister's right. Maybe I am a helicopter mom. I don't think I'm a Black Hawk yet, but how can I know?*

Being appropriately involved with your children and protecting them when needed and not slipping down the slope of excessive sheltering is a delicate balance. Malinda Carlson, in her article “10 Warning Signs That You Might Be a Helicopter Parent (and How to Stop),” gives us some informative and challenging guidance. She says you might be a helicopter parent if you recognize some of these ten signs:

1. You only let your child play on playgrounds with shredded rubber mulch.
2. The first thing you did when your fourth grader came

“A child needs both to be hugged and unhugged. The hug lets her know she is valuable. The unhug lets her know that she is viable. If you're always shoving your child away, they will cling to you for love. If you're always holding them closer, they will cling to you for fear.”

**POLLY BERRIEN
BERENDS**

- home crying from school because her best friend Jill called her a name is to call Jill's mom to sort things out yourself.
3. You have found yourself up at 11 p.m. rewriting your child's English essay because you know that she could have done a better job if she hadn't been so tired.
 4. Your eight-year-old still has training wheels on his bike. Not that you let him ride it that often. The sidewalks are dangerous, and they go too fast for you to keep up!
 5. You have a bad back from stooping down and following your toddler's every step.
 6. You get heart palpitations at the thought of letting your child go on a field trip with their class.
 7. Having them help out by preparing dinner or cleaning the house has never crossed your mind. Knives are sharp and the cleaning fluids are too dangerous!
 8. As a Christmas gift you gave your daycare a webcam so you could watch the daily happenings while you're at work.
 9. You and your son have a meeting with the teacher, and when she asks him a question you answer it for him.
 10. Your child didn't get accepted to his preferred major at college, so you call the chair of the department to negotiate for an exception.¹

We don't have to be guilty of all of these to be a helicopter mom or an aerial-drone dad, but you get the picture. Now what do we do about it?

The first thing is to step back to see if this describes how you parent. When your child is playing soccer, football, or T-ball, are you behind the fence or on the field? If you're on the field and in the coach's or ref's ear, you might be "cossetting"—or worse. Make a list of what you do that might qualify as overparenting. Consider getting some help from that sister of yours, a teacher, or your spouse. Maybe you're helping your child complete a puzzle when she becomes frustrated. Back off and give her more time. Go down your list and eliminate a few things

at a time. Allow your child to fail, and then teach him he doesn't have to be perfect. Children need to work at things, but they don't have to be perfect and always finish in first place.

Perhaps the hardest thing is to let them fight their own battles. Yes, we need to guard our children from obviously dangerous encounters. However, letting them deal with the everyday skirmishes and struggles of this life will equip them with the skills they'll need when you're no longer in the next room.

It comes down to what we want to accomplish with our parenting. Do we want our children to be "safe," protected from every possible difficulty? Or do we want them to be strong, self-assured, and grounded?

We hope even a lawn-mower dad can answer that one.

*"There's a lot of ugly things in this world, son.
I wish I could keep 'em all away from you.
That's never possible."*

Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*