

Pediatrician suggests 14 ways to show your child love

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On Valentine's Day, there are many ways we can show children how much we love them that go beyond candy and cards.

Here are 14 ways to let your child at any age know they are special and build nurturing lifelong bonds.

From the moment they're born, little ones love being held, cuddled and caressed. Along with gentle touches your child gets when you feed, diaper and rock them, consider adding baby massage to your care routine. It's a simple way to make your infant feel safe, secure and cared for. Research shows that physical touch is also essential to a child's health and emotional development.

Start reading to your child beginning in infancy. Many studies show that reading together strengthens parent-child bonds and promotes positive parenting. Plus, when you read to or with your child, you help them build a foundation for success in school, which is linked to long-term wellness.

When your child is angry, grouchy or in a bad mood, try not to take it personally. Calm your own emotions first, perhaps by taking a deep breath, and then give a quick hug, cuddle, pat, secret nod, or other sign of affection. Once they are also calm and feeling better, consider talking with them about the event and how they might better manage those strong emotions next time.

Discipline with love. Use positive, nonviolent discipline. Harsh physical and verbal punishments don't work and can damage long-term physical and mental health. From an early age, explain clear and consistent rules that your children can understand. Give praise when they follow them—not just punishment when they don't. Calmly explain consequences and follow through right away when rules are broken.

Mark game nights or other family activities on your calendar so that everyone can look forward to enjoying time together. Plan some outdoor fun together and time at home playing and connecting as a family. Also be sure to carve out one-on-one time with each of your children regularly

to do something they enjoy. Put away cell phones, tablets and other media devices during these special times and really focus on each other. On occasions when media is part of your family-time plan, co-viewing is a great way to spark great conversations.

Show how much you care by taking your children to the doctor regularly for well-child care visits. Make sure they are up-to-date on vaccines to protect them against infectious diseases, including COVID-19, flu, and other recommended immunizations. Teach them how to be safe from injuries, provide a healthy and nutritious diet, and encourage good amounts of sleep and exercise to help them grow healthy and strong. Create a safe home environment, and use seat belts or car seats every time you are in a vehicle.

Use plenty of positive and encouraging words when talking with your child. Model consideration and gratitude by saying "please" and "thank you." Skip the sarcasm, mockery and put-downs, even if teasing. Children often don't understand your purpose. Even if they do, these messages can harm [self-esteem](#) and create negative ways of talking and connecting with each other.

If you lose your cool and react harshly to your child, apologize and explain how you will handle the situation in the future. Be sure to keep your promise. Also forgive yourself. No one is perfect. Understanding how to forgive is important for your child to accept their own mistakes as well, and build confidence and resilience.

Spend time together in nature when you can, exploring ways to appreciate and protect it. Taking steps to care for the environment will show your children how you care about their future. Many children and teens hear about or experience climate-change-fueled disasters such as wildfires and severe storms. Talk with them about their concerns in a way that is honest, hopeful, developmentally appropriate, and solution-

oriented.

One of the best ways to teach your children about nutritious food choices and enjoy each other's company is to cook together. Involve them in the entire process, from planning the menus to shopping for ingredients to preparing and serving the meal. Family meals are a great opportunity to talk and connect.

Help your child develop positive relationships with friends, siblings, and members of the community. Teach them about the value of kindness. Encourage your child to be involved in activities that require teamwork, such as sports. Get to know your child's friends and talk about responsible and respectful relationships.

Ask your child "How was your day?" and actively listen to the answer. Be available when your child wants to talk, even if it's not the best time for you. If they tell you about a challenge they are facing, let them finish the story before helping them solve the problem.

More than two years after the American Academy of Pediatrics and other organizations declared a [national emergency](#) in youth mental health, many kids are still struggling. If you see signs of anxiety or depression, talk with your child's pediatrician.

Tell your child you love them no matter who they love. Tell your teen they can talk with you about any crushes they may have. This is a good opportunity to talk about dating, relationships, gender identity, and sexual activity. We can make sure our children understand how to respect their bodies and others and practice informed and enthusiastic consent.

Remember, all children want their parent's attention, no matter their age. Make time every day to talk. Young people are more likely to make

healthy choices if they stay connected with family members. And don't forget to say "I love you" to your children on Feb. 14—and many more times as they grow up. They are never too old to hear it.

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