

## Six Key Relationship Skills for Parents

**Turning Toward your Partner** (based on Gottman). When someone wants to make a connection, they make “bids for affection.” These can be questions, invitations, gestures, glances, or touch: anything that asks you to connect. When someone bids for your attention, there are three ways you can respond.

**Turn Toward:** Act in a responsive, interested, positive, and loving way. Reach out, touch them, look at them, smile. Say “I hear you”, “I want to connect with you,” “I’m interested in you.” Ask a question.

**Turn Away:** Act in a way that ignores them, or dismisses their bid. Look away, wander away. Don’t respond verbally, or respond in a way that has nothing to do with what they said.

**Turn Against:** Act in an angry way that rejects them and their bid. Walk away, glare, make threatening movements. Use sarcasm or put-downs, roll your eyes. Do the opposite of what they asked you to do.

In the most successful relationships, partners have a 20:1 ratio. 20 positive bids and/or turning toward incidents for every one incident of turning against or away. Can you aim for at least 5:1? What can you do today to “bid” for affection? Can you listen today for bids from your partner, and try to turn toward?

### **Expressing Appreciation** (inspired by Hendricks and Louden)

When caring for young children, it can seem like you give and give, and get very little back. The repetitive nature of the chores can leave us feeling like we’re not accomplishing anything meaningful. Also, as our burden of responsibilities increases, our relationships change, and we might start feeling disconnected and invisible to our partner. All this leaves us feeling drained and undervalued. One of the best ways to re-fill our tanks is by creating a “culture of appreciation”. Some ideas:

- Always thank your partner for the things s/he has done. Even if they’re part of his/her “job.” It’s still nice to know that they are noticed and appreciated.
- When asking your partner to do something, make it a real question (i.e. something they could say no to) not an order disguised as a question. (And say please!) Thank them if they say yes.
- Five minute writing. Each of you takes a piece of paper and a pen. Spend five full minutes listing everything you love about your partner. Pour out all the appreciation you haven’t had time to share. Give your list to your partner to have and to hold.
- Exchanging appreciations: Sit facing each other. One person begins with “Something I appreciate about you is...” The other partner listens to that, lets it sink in, says thank you, and then shares something that they appreciate about the other.
- Post-its: leave notes around the house, listing what you love about each other or life in general.
- Write a thank you note, letting him/her know why you’re glad s/he is a part of your life.

### **Speak your partner’s love language** (Chapman)

In Chapman’s The Five Love Languages, he posits that different individuals have different “languages” they use to express love, and that we “hear” love best when it’s spoken in our language. Which one of these sounds most like how your partner hears love from you? Which describes how you hear love?

*Physical Touch:* Feels most loved when you touch him/her: stroke her hair, hold hands, massage, rub her feet, hugging, kissing, sex. Feels most rejected when touch is missing (or if touch is used in anger).

*Words of Affirmation:* Encouragement and praise are vital. Being acknowledged for work, appreciated for who s/he is, validated for concerns, cheered on for efforts. May be very sensitive to criticism.

*Acts of Service:* Wants active support with household tasks, like laundry, washing dishes, running errands, making a to-do list together and taking on jobs. Feels unsupported when you don’t pitch in.

*Gifts:* Loves any special little thing done just for him/her. Little notes left around the house, something special from the grocery store, pictures of the baby texted during the day. Will be especially upset if you forget a birthday, anniversary or other gift-giving occasion.

*Quality Time:* Wants your Presence - time together, spent talking and connecting, doing activities together. Feels unsupported if you're off buying gifts or doing tasks instead of spending time together.

Discuss this with your partner. Are you right about what his/her language is? What does s/he think is your language? Sometimes couples discover that if one is feeling unloved, it's not that their partner wasn't trying to communicate love, it's just that s/he was shouting a lot in the wrong language.

### **Spend Time with your Partner**

Ideally, you will find a way to have a regular date night with your partner. It doesn't have to be anything fancy. Just a chance to be together, really listen to each other, really see the other person, and remember why you chose to spend your lives together. Celebrate being a couple!

But beyond date night, think about ways that even a few minutes a day can make a big difference. In an article by Carolyn Pirak ([www.parentmap.com/article/make-time-for-your-partner](http://www.parentmap.com/article/make-time-for-your-partner)) she recommends making a commitment to 40 minutes a day to improve your relationship: When you separate, spend at least two minutes saying goodbye. When you reunite, spend 20 minutes talking about your days. Take five minutes a day to express appreciation to each other. Devote at least 8 minutes a day to showing affection. Give at least five minutes a day to sharing dreams and planning ahead.

Make a plan for special time together this week. Each day, grab some sweet little moments together.

### **Conflict Resolution / Communicating Needs**

In an argument, you may find yourself saying "You *never* do X" or "You *always* do Y." This is generally not true, and you know that even as you're saying it. Plus, when we say never or always, we're casting our partner as a villain, and ourselves as a victim, and set up an on-going cycle of blame and conflict.

The never or always gives us a hint about what our hot button issues are, but to solve the underlying issues, we need to step out of blaming / adversarial stance and start thinking like allies again.

1. Identify what you need. Many conflicts arise because one or both of you is not getting something that you need. Sometimes you need to figure it out yourself before you can tell your partner.
2. Communicate that need to your partner. Be clear, and specific. Use the "I" word – "I need this", not the "You" word – "Here's what you need to do." Help them understand how you feel about this emotionally. "It makes me sad when..." "I feel overwhelmed when..."
3. Ask for help meeting that need.
4. Listen to your partner's opinions and concerns. Avoid interrupting, criticizing, defensiveness, and contempt. (Expressed out loud or with body language.) Paraphrase – repeat back what your partner has said, and make sure you heard him/her right.
5. Ask your partner what s/he needs and work together to get that need met.

Next time you find yourself in conflict, try these ideas. Even better, try working preventatively. When you're not in the heat of the moment, explore one area of conflict, and see what you learn together.

**Use We Messages.** Speak more often of "us", "we", and "our goals / plans" and less often about "I, me, and my goals / plans." Just changing your language reminds you of your partnership.