

“I love you” gives our children a taste of the love of God and his unconditional acceptance of them through Christ. “You can’t have your own way” helps our children understand that getting their own way won’t make them happy, but that true happiness only comes from total surrender to Christ.

Because of this, both unconditional love and structure help children learn to place their faith and trust in God. Affirmation helps us accomplish the goal of a father – to disciple our children to love God and others from the heart.

APPLICATION

1. Consider the following passages: Ephesians 6:4; 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12. How do these passages relate to Affirmation and the ideas presented in this article?
2. Under which of the fathering paradigms in this article did you grow up? What impact has that had on you as a father?
3. Which of these fathering paradigms best describe you? Why do you think that is? If applicable, what could God do in your heart to help you become more of an Affirming Father?

Business leader, author, and speaker, Patrick Morley helps men think more deeply about their lives, to be reconciled with Christ, and to be equipped for a larger impact on the world.

David Delk is the COO of Man in the Mirror

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180 Wilshire Blvd.
Casselberry, FL 32707
Catalog Orders: 1-800-929-2536
For more info: (407) 472-2100 Fax: (407) 331-7839
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Affirmation – Shaping the Heart of Your Child

Patrick Morley and David Delk

Pat and Patsy Morley went to a parenting seminar presented by Larry Crabb when their children were small. Twenty years later Pat can still remember one of the important ideas from that event. Larry Crabb said, “Our children need to know, yes, I love you and, no, you can’t have your own way.”

This is a huge idea. *Yes, I love you, and, no, you can’t have your own way.* This is the idea of affirmation, and it has two parts to it – the expression of *love* and the idea of *structure*.

Love gives our children security because they have a safe place where they are completely accepted. Structure gives our children security because boundaries say, “You don’t have to face life’s tough decisions on your own.” Without both love and structure, your children will have an affirmation deficit, not receiving the affirmation they need to become the people God wants them to be.

Consider the impact of these misguided fathering paradigms:

THE DISCONNECTED FATHER

“No, I don’t love you and, yes, you can have your own way.”

This is the father who doesn’t care enough to provide structure for his children.

Thirteen year-old Tim came into the living room to ask his dad if he could go see a violent, sex-saturated R-rated movie with a friend and his father. His dad continued reading the paper and answered without even turning his head. “I don’t care. If you want to, go ahead.”

You may have had a father like this. The words may echo in your mind to this day. *I don’t care what you do.* What’s the message behind these words? *No, I don’t love you and, yes, you can have your own way.*

Sometimes this message is sent by our actions, not our words. Many fathers are simply not involved because of divorce or the difficulties of spending time with their children. Others have chosen a career path that makes it impossible for them to even have regular input into their child’s decisions. These fathers don’t really know what their kids are doing.

For their children, it's the same message. *No, I don't love you and, yes, you can have your own way.* The father who is not around and does not really know what his children are doing has made them into orphans just as much as the man who says, "I don't care what you do." He's communicating, "No, I don't love you" because I'm not around, and "No, I don't care what you do" because I'm not showing any interest in what you do.

A man's own folly ruins his life, yet his heart rages against the LORD.
Proverbs 19:3

That sounds harsh, but it's true. And hundreds of thousands of children are growing up in homes with disconnected fathers. (40% of the children in America will go to bed tonight without one of their parents in the home.) If this was your experience, now is the opportunity to break the cycle.

THE AUTHORITARIAN FATHER

"No, I don't love you and, no, you can't have your way." This is a father who controls too many aspects of his children's lives. In a family like this, Tim came into the living room and asked if he could go see the movie. His father exploded in anger, "You must be kidding me? Why in the world do you think I would let you go to a movie like that? What kind of family do you think this is? There is no way I would ever let you see a movie like that."

What's the message that is conveyed by this response? *No, I don't love you and, no, you can't have your way.* The Disconnected Father makes an orphan out of his child, but this second father creates a prison camp atmosphere in his household.

Sometimes this same message can be taught to children even when their father is not around. An overly strict father who travels too much or works late every night is sending the same message. His children know implicitly that they are not a high priority in his life. They hear it loud and clear – *No, I don't love you and no, you can't have your own way.*

THE PERMISSIVE FATHER

"Yes, I love you; yes, you can have your own way."

This is the father who tries to be more of a friend than a parent. When asked by Tim about going to see the movie, he might put his arm around Tim and say, "Sure, son, whatever you want to do."

A lot of fathers feel that in order to be successful they need to be their kid's best friend. That's not what our kids want. Pat's kids told him,

"Dad, we don't want you to be our best friend. We want you to be our Dad."

How many times have we been tempted to compromise our values because of a desire to show our children we love them? (If you haven't been tempted at all, perhaps you fit in the Authoritarian Father category above.) If we allow our children to do things we believe are wrong in order to show that we love them, we are saying *"Yes, I love you and yes, you can have your own way."*

Don't "buy" the love of your children by letting them have their own way all the time. Instead, find legitimate ways to show your children you love them so you can say no when you need to say no.

THE AFFIRMING FATHER

"Yes, I love you; no, you can't have your own way."

Our children need the affirmation of knowing they have both *unconditional love* and *structure*.

Affirmation helps a child understand the dignity that comes with being created in the image of God. Children who are loved grow up to believe they are someone special, created for a great calling and an important destiny.

Structure provides affirmation because in their hearts children want and need boundaries. The world is a scary place and they need to know they don't have to face life alone. When we provide structure for children, we are relieving the pressure of making choices and facing situations for which they are not ready.

Structure is an important way God redirects our hearts toward Him. Wanting to get our own way is the essence of sin. Since the fall of Adam, we have been tempted to believe that if we just get what we want we will be happy. Ironically, one of the ways God judges men who rebel against him is by letting them destroy their lives through getting their own way.

If your children are angry with you for not letting them have their own way, deal with it. It's the same way with God and us. Ironically, often we are angry with God for not giving us things that would destroy us if we received them.

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.
Proverbs 22:15

When you focus on the heart in your parenting instead of just looking at performance, both "I love you" and "you can't have your own way" are equally important. They help shape the attitudes and beliefs of your child's heart. They are deposits into a child's emotional bank account.