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Creating a Strong Family "I Love You, Bill"

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

Sound research across the United States and around the world has clearly uncovered what makes families work well. Many more studies remain to be conducted in countless cultures that have not been examined, but the broad outline of the qualities of strong families is becoming more and more clear.

Knowing what works is only the first step, however. The next step is to act upon this knowledge, and many educators, clinicians and researchers are trying to devise ways for teaching and learning about how to strengthen families.

If we know, for example, that appreciation and affection are important contributions to the strength of a relationship, how can we help people learn to use these tools in their lives together? This can be especially difficult in American culture, which is often long on competition and "attitude," and short on the genuine expression of kind, honest and tender emotion.

For some reason, many of us got it planted in our heads that to express appreciation is an act of weakness or an act that will somehow poison the "victim" of one's praise. "She knows how important she is to me," is commonly said, "and I really don't need to tell her." In the case of our children, we sometimes harbor the vague and contorted belief that if we were to actually thank them for being who they are and hazard verbal and/or physical affection, it would somehow swell their heads.

But if too much praise swells the head, does too little praise cause one's head to shrivel up or implode?

For a number of years we conducted a series of relationship enrichment workshops for couples. We experimented with various ways of helping people practice expressing appreciation and affection. We invited couples who were doing pretty well in their relationship and who wanted to enhance the good feelings they already had. One approach that evolved proved especially enlightening.

We asked each individual to write down all the reasons they had for loving their partner. We gave them plenty of time to do this and then asked the couples to come to the front of the room to share what they had to say before the group.

We knew this would be difficult for people, especially in front of others. But we felt it was important to do for at least three reasons: so we could all get a better understanding of why human beings love each other; so we could get some good practice sharing these feelings; and so we could triple underline the importance of these feelings by sharing them with others. In human cultures, weddings are public events because they signify the sanctity of human connection for all who attend. A relationship enhancement workshop was another way of blessing humans' love for each other.

The first woman who volunteered to talk had a long list for her partner. Here are some of her reasons:

"I love you, Bill, because you're such a good listener. You let me talk about my day and what's important in my life, and you clearly enjoy what I have to say."

"I love you because you're funny. You have such a great sense of humor."

"You're very honest with me and everyone else in your life, and I think this is very, very important. But you're honest in a gentle way."

"I love you because you're so patient and kind to the kids. You hardly ever get mad, and when you do, you have pretty much every reason to do so."

"I'm proud of you for what you do in your profession. You are so good at your work, and you make enough money to make a good life possible for all of us."

"You're handy around the house, and that saves us a lot of money."

"I love you because I know you love me."

"Oh, and I love you because you're a great lover!"

It was an extraordinarily moving moment for all of us in the room. Bill, of course, was almost overwhelmed with feeling. "Oh, gosh," he breathed. "I don't know what to say." He was next, however, and he did an excellent job of telling the good things he admired about his partner Allison. The hushed group witnessing this very intimate moment in life was captivated.

To emphasize the importance of these events, we videotaped each interchange. We played them all back, especially so each couple could see themselves: There was Joe reading his list and saying, off-handedly, "Oh, Sue knows all this," while Susan's eyes glistened in appreciation for getting the chance to hear it all once again. And there was Alexander, always stoic, listening so intently to Annah, trying to swallow his emotions as his Adam's apple bobbed up and down anxiously.

We had homework in class, of course, and the assignment after this session was to take these wonderful expressions of love and do something special with them. "Write them down in a card for your partner, have them framed, put them in the beginning pages of a book of poetry, create a refrigerator magnet, whatever you would like," the assignment read. "Make them a permanent expression of how you feel about each other."

Three weeks later Annah came up before the evening's discussion began and displayed a beautiful locket on a gold chain she had around her neck. "Inside is a tiny scroll," she beamed. "Adam had the reasons he loves me inscribed by a calligrapher in tiny letters on a scroll tied by a small ribbon. It's wonderful!"

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