



In this adaptation of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *The Five Love Languages*® (more than 20 million copies sold), Dr. Gary Chapman explores the world in which teenagers live, explains their developmental changes, and gives tools to help you identify and appropriately communicate in your teen's love language.

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# Understanding Today's Teenagers

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Teenagers didn't even exist eighty years ago . . . well, sort of. At least they weren't given their own separate generational distinction until the recent past. The word *teenager* first came into popular use around the time of the Second World War. Though many changes have taken place since the first teenagers arrived formally on the social scene, there are plenty of similarities between the teens of the 1940s and those of the twenty-first century.

From the early days of emerging teenage culture to its contemporary counterpart, the underlying themes have been the same: *independence* and *self-identity*. Throughout the years, teenagers in our American society have been active in searching for their identity while trying to establish independence from their parents. Neither of these themes played too loudly in the “pre-teenager” era.

Before the industrial age, teens worked on their parents' farms until they were married and were given or inherited their own acreage.

Identity was not something the teen sought; he was a farmer from the time he was old enough to work in the fields. The adolescent boy or girl was a child until he or she married—then the child became an adult.

### **THE SEARCH FOR INDEPENDENCE AND IDENTITY**

Until the early 1940s, independence was unthinkable until the adolescent was married. However, a lot of that changed with the coming of industrialization—one's identity became more a matter of choice. You could learn a trade and work in the factory, thus becoming a machinist, a weaver, a cobbler, etc. Independence was also more of a reality because securing a job could mean moving to a neighboring village where, with monies earned, one could establish a separate residence from parents. Thus, the larger cultural changes became the backdrop for an emerging teenage culture.

Since the 1940s, teenagers have followed this paradigm of developing independence and identity, but they have done so in a rapidly changing world. One by one electricity, telephones, automobiles, radios, airplanes, televisions, computers, and the internet have expanded the possibilities of developing new styles for seeking independence and identity. The contemporary teenager lives in a truly global society. Interestingly, however, his focus continues to be upon himself—his identity and his independence. There will be much more about this later.

The places where the teenager expresses independence and identity have changed through the years, but the means continue to be basically the same: music, dance, fashion, fads, language, and relationships. For example, the musical genre has expanded through the years from big bands to rhythm and blues, rock and roll, folk, country, heavy metal, rap, and so forth. The teen continues to have

much more variety from which to choose. But you can be certain that, no matter what, the teen's musical taste will be different from that of his parents: it's a matter of independence and identity. The same principle is true in all other areas of teenage culture.

So what characterizes the contemporary teen culture? How is your teenager similar to and different from teenagers of other generations?

## **THEN AND NOW: FIVE SIMILARITIES**

### ***1. Facing Physical and Mental Changes***

The basic challenges facing today's teenager are very similar to the challenges you faced when you were a teenager. First, there is the challenge of accepting and adapting to the changes that take place in the teen's body. Arms and legs, hands and feet are all growing, sometimes at a disproportionate rate, producing the reality of "teenage clumsiness" (which can be a source of extreme embarrassment for the teenager). Sexual characteristics are also developing, which may be both exciting and anxiety-inducing. And what parent has not felt the pain as they watched their teenager struggle with that most devastating of enemies—acne?

These physiological changes spur numerous questions in the mind of the teenager. "I'm becoming an adult, but what will I look like? Will I be too tall or too short? Will my ears protrude too far? Will my breasts be too small? What about my nose? Are my feet too big? Am I too fat or too skinny?" The parade of questions marches on and on through the mind of the developing teenager. The manner in which a teenager answers these questions will either have a positive or negative effect upon his/her self-identity.

With this physical growth, there is also an accompanying "intellectual growth spurt." The teenager is developing a new way of thinking.

As a child, she thought in terms of concrete actions and events. As a teenager, she begins to think in terms of abstract concepts like honesty, loyalty, and justice. With abstract thinking comes the expanded world of unlimited possibilities. The teen now has the ability to think about how things could be different, what a world without war would look like, or how understanding parents would treat their children. The world of expanded possibilities opens all kinds of doors for self-identity. The teenager realizes, “I could be a brain surgeon or a pilot or a garbage collector.” The possibilities are unlimited and the teen may envision himself in numerous vocational settings.

## ***2. Entering the Age of Reason***

Adolescence is also the age of reason. The teenager is beginning to think logically and to see the logical consequences of different positions. This logic is applied not only to his own reasoning but also to the reasoning of his parents. Do you see why a teenager might often be perceived as “argumentative”? In reality, he is developing his mental skills. If the parents understand this, they can then have meaningful and interesting conversations with their teenagers. If they don’t understand this, they can develop an adversarial relationship, and the teenager must go elsewhere to flex his newfound intellectual muscles. With this rapid growth in intellectual development and the gleaning of new information, the teenager often believes himself to be smarter than his parents and, in some areas, he may be right.

This advanced level of thinking leads the teenager into a whole new arena of challenges in the field of social relationships. The discussion of “ideas” with his peers and listening to their point of view gives rise to new levels of intimacy on the one hand and opens the possibility of an adversarial relationship on the other. Thus, development of

cliques (small, close social groups) among teens has far more to do with agreement over intellectual ideas than it does with things like dress and hair color. Teens, like adults, tend to feel more comfortable with those who agree with them.

### ***3. Confronting Personal Morality and Values***

The intellectual ability to analyze ideas and actions in a logical manner and to project outcomes of certain beliefs gives rise to another common teenage challenge: examining the belief systems with which one was raised, and determining if those beliefs are worthy of one's commitment. "Were my parents right in their views of God, morality, and values?" These are heavy issues with which every teenager must wrestle. If parents do not understand this struggle they will often become a negative influence and actually push the teenager away.

When the teenager questions the parents about basic beliefs, wise parents welcome the questions, seek to give honest answers in a nonauthoritarian manner, and encourage the teenager to continue to explore these ideas. In other words, they welcome the opportunity to dialogue with the teenager about the beliefs that they have espoused through the years. If, on the other hand, the parents reject the teenager's questions, perhaps heaping guilt upon him for even thinking that the parents' beliefs may be incorrect, the teenager is forced to go elsewhere to share his questions.

### ***4. Thinking About Sexuality and Marriage***

Another important challenge for the teenager is beginning to understand his own sexuality while learning masculine or feminine social roles. What is appropriate and not appropriate in relating to members of the opposite sex? What is appropriate and inappropriate

in dealing with their own sexual thoughts and feelings? These questions, often ignored by parents, cannot be ignored by the teenager.

The teen's emerging sexuality is a part of who he is, and relating to members of the opposite sex is an ever-present reality. Many teens dream of someday being married and having a family. In a survey that asked teens to rank a number of the important issues in their future, "eighty-six percent said that having a stable family will be the most important item on the blueprint of their future lives."<sup>1</sup> Making the journey from early adolescence to that stable marriage and family that the teen desires occupies many hours of teenage thought.

Parents who want to help will use the normal flow of family conversation to address issues related to sexuality, dating, and marriage. They will also guide their teenager to the right printed materials and websites that speak on the teenage level while providing practical and sound information. For those teenagers who are involved in church or youth group, caring adults and youth ministers often provide sessions relating to sex, dating, and marriage. These classes provide a social context in which teens can learn and discuss this important aspect of teen development in an open and caring way.

### ***5. Questioning the Future***

There is one other common challenge faced by teenagers of the past and present. It is grappling with the question: "What will I do with my life?" This question does involve choosing a vocation, but it is far deeper than that. It is ultimately a spiritual question: "What is worth the investment of my life? Where will I find the greatest happiness? And where can I make the greatest contribution?" As philosophical as these questions may appear, they are very real to our teenagers. More immediately, teenagers must answer the questions:



“Will I go to college, and if so, where? Should I join the military, and if so, which branch? Or should I get a job, and if so, which job?” Of course, teenagers understand that these choices all lead somewhere. There is something beyond the next step and somehow, the next step will influence where teenagers end up. It is an awesome challenge for these young minds.

Parents who wish to be helpful will share something of their own struggle, their own joys, and their own disappointments. As a parent, you cannot and should not offer easy answers, but you can encourage the teenager's search and perhaps introduce your son or daughter to people of various vocations who can share their journey. You can encourage your adolescent to take advantage of vocational counselors both at high school and later at the university. But ultimately, you should encourage your teenager to follow the example of Samuel. The ancient Hebrew prophet heard God's call as a teenager, and said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”<sup>2</sup> The men and women who have made the greatest impact upon human history have been men and women who had a sense of divine call and who lived out that call in their vocation.

## **FIVE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES**

With all these similarities, let's not forget that a mighty gulf exists between the contemporary teenager and teenagers of the past (even the recent past); that gulf is the modern cultural setting in which teens face the challenges noted above. What are some of these cultural differences?

## ***1. Technology***

One of the most observable differences is that contemporary teenagers have grown up in a world of highly advanced technology. Their parents grew up with mobile phones, cable TV, and the dawn of the internet, but the contemporary “digital native” teenager has hardly known a world without mobile internet, social media, and wired-in classrooms. Every movie ever produced is available through streaming; every song ever sung can be heard on Spotify, courtesy of the teenager’s ever-present smartphone.

The contemporary teen has also grown up with no “pre-internet” memories; the teenager and the internet have both come of age together. What we used to call the “information superhighway” has grown into a vast mobile web with both positive and negative influences upon the contemporary teenager. Besides giving our teens immediate access to the latest in movies, fashion, music, and sports, it allows them to have up-to-the-second updates on where their friends are, and who has broken up with whom. In fact, with the proliferation of social networking and mobile updates, the internet has not only outpaced the traditional telephone as the teen’s method of communicating with friends and discussing ideas, but it has literally taken it over. You are much more likely to see your teenager texting, browsing, and/or playing a video game (often at the same time) on their telephone than you are to see them talking on it. These technological realities put your teenager in touch with the world and the world in touch with your teenager. The contemporary teenager is exposed to far more cultural stimuli than his parents ever could have dreamed at his age.

## ***2. Knowledge of and Exposure to Violence***

A second cultural difference is that your teenager is growing up with far more knowledge of violent human behavior. Part of this is because of technological advances, that is, more violence is reported through the media, but a part of it simply reflects our culture's thirst—almost obsession—for violence. Our movies, songs, and novels often rush toward violent scenes. One youth survey found that 36 percent of teenagers had seen a movie or television show containing a lot of violence in the past month.

Interestingly, the survey said that eight in ten teens, 78 percent, told the Gallup organization that they “do not have a problem watching violent movies or television programs.” However, 53 percent of the same teenagers agreed “violence on television and in movies sends the wrong messages to young people.” The same survey indicated that 65 percent of the teens surveyed believe that “movies and television have a great deal of influence on the outlook of young people today.”<sup>3</sup>

Exposure to violence is not limited to the media and movies. Many contemporary teenagers have experienced violence on the personal level. They have watched their fathers physically abuse their mothers or they themselves have suffered physical abuse from fathers, stepfathers, or other adults. Most teenagers acknowledge that the public school is often the scene of violent behavior.

Some teens are even perpetrators of violence—including homicide. Youth (under 18 years old) account for 7 percent of arrests for violent crimes, while young adults (ages 18–24) make up 21 percent of violent crime arrests. Thankfully, for the past two decades, youth arrests for violent crimes (including homicide, robbery, and assault) have been declining,<sup>4</sup> but in many communities, youth violence remains the most serious challenge.

### ***3. The Fragmented Family***

A third cultural factor that influences the contemporary teenager is the fragmented nature of the modern American family. According to a US Census Bureau study, one in four children (25.8 percent) are living with only one of their parents. In 83 percent of these cases, the absent parent is the father.<sup>5</sup>

Sociologists have observed “in unprecedented numbers, our families are unlike: we have fathers working while mothers keep house; fathers and mothers both working away from home; single parents; second marriages bringing children together from unrelated backgrounds; childless couples; unmarried couples with and without children; and gay and lesbian parents. We are living through a period of historic change in American family life.”<sup>6</sup> Another researcher noted, “The data is not yet in on the residual of this fragmentation, but a sociological view suggests a direct link with many of the social strains we see every day. Some of the attitudes, stress, alienation . . . and shortened attention spans are directly related to strains of adjusting to new kinds of families.”<sup>7</sup>

It is not news that today's teen often grows up without the presence of extended family. James Comer, director of the Yale Child Study Center, sees this as a factor nearly as critical as the breakdown of the nuclear family. Speaking of his own childhood, Comer said, “Between home and school, at least five close friends of my parents reported everything I did that was unacceptable. They are not there anymore for today's kids.”<sup>8</sup> In the past, teenagers could depend upon extended families, healthy neighborhoods, churches, and community groups. The contemporary teen (and parent) most often does not have these nets of support.

#### ***4. Knowledge of and Exposure to Sexuality***

Today's overtly sexual atmosphere, the one in which our teens are growing up, is a vastly different situation. The baby boomers of the 1960s rebelled against the traditional sexual mores of their parents, but they remembered what the sexual rules were and sometimes even experienced guilt in breaking them. But the contemporary teenager has grown up in a world without sexual rules. Movies, media, and music all equate sex with love and depict sex as an expected part of a meaningful dating relationship. Thus, vast numbers of teenagers are sexually active.

Teenagers who are not sexually active struggle with thoughts such as *Am I missing out on something important? Is there something wrong with me?* Meanwhile, those teens who are sexually active have other negative feelings: they often feel used, abused, and empty.

The contemporary teen lives in a world where sex is not only an expected part of the dating relationship but living together before marriage is more and more common, and homosexual relationships are being promoted as alternative lifestyles. Indeed, the words bisexual and transgender are common vocabulary for the modern teen. In a very real sense, sex has become the American goddess, and the shrines and venues for worship are as varied as the mind can imagine. This is the world in which the contemporary teenager must navigate the already scary waters of his/her own emerging sexuality.

#### ***5. Neutral Moral and Religious Values***

Finally, the contemporary teen is growing up in a world that is truly post-Christian. In the area of religion and morals, there is no sure word. In past generations, most Americans could have defined moral and immoral behavior. These moral judgments were primarily based on the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. This is not true for the

contemporary teenager. For the first time in American history, an entire generation is growing up without certain moral values. Values are often neutral; the teen is told that what feels good—is good. Right and wrong are relative.

The teenage years have always been the time to explore religious beliefs. Teens are asking questions about the religious beliefs—or disbeliefs—of their parents. As in other areas of life, they are seeking to clarify their own identity. The difference in the contemporary world is that because of the global nature of today's world, our teens are exposed to numerous religious beliefs—both by means of modern technology and through friends who are involved in other religious groups.

Religion is important to some contemporary teens, but less so on average than their parents. A Pew Research Center report indicated that only 24 percent of US teens say religion is “very important” in their lives, compared to 43 percent of parents. About two-thirds of teens are affiliated with religion, and 34 percent attend religious services at least weekly.<sup>9</sup> Today's teenagers are more interested in the experiential, relational nature of religious groups than abstract religious belief. If the group is accepting, caring, and supportive, they are drawn to the spiritual group even though they may disagree with many of the group's religious beliefs.

## **PARENTS CAN GUIDE**

This is the world into which your teenager has come of age. The good news is that contemporary teenagers are looking to parents for guidance. In a survey, teens reported that parents have more influence than peers do in the following areas: whether to attend college, whether to attend religious services, whether to do homework, and whether to drink. Parents also had an impact on the teens' job or career plans.

Friends had more influence on their decisions in terms of immediate issues such as whether or not to cut classes, who to date, hairstyles, and what kind of clothes they wore.<sup>10</sup>

The survey found that when teenagers were asked to report “Who has the greatest influence on your decisions? Parents or friends?” the decisions most heavily weighted toward parental influence were those that appear to have a major effect on what kind of person the teen will be. Yes, your teenager will be influenced by friends on some issues, but parents are still the major influence on their teenager’s thoughts and behavior. The remaining chapters of this book are designed to help you learn to effectively meet your teenager’s need for love and thus lay the foundation for influencing your teen more effectively in all other areas of life.

# The Key: Love from Parents

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Becky, a mother of two, had all the symptoms of parental trauma. “Dr. Chapman, I’m frightened to death,” she said. “My son is twelve; my daughter is eleven. I’ve been reading books about teenagers and I’m scared. It seems like all teenagers are having sex, using drugs, and carrying guns to school. Is it really that bad?” Becky asked the question during a marriage seminar in Moline, Illinois. Then she added, “I’ve been thinking that maybe I should homeschool my children through high school but that also scares me. I don’t know if I am ready for my children to become teenagers.”

In recent years, I have met a lot of parents like Becky. Many parents are reading more books about parenting teenagers. They are hearing more on television about teenage violence. If you happen to be one of these scared parents, or if you are asking yourself, “Should I be scared?” I hope this chapter will allay some of your fears. Anxiety is not a good mental attitude with which to parent teenagers. I hope



that this chapter will relieve some of your anxiety and give you more confidence in the positive role you can play in the life of your teenager.

## THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS

Let me begin by reporting that not all of the facts are negative. A recent study indicates that a strong majority of young people feel they have good relationships with their loved ones (89 percent).<sup>1</sup> In addition, the vast majority (84.6 percent) of teens will graduate high school.<sup>2</sup>

Laurence Steinberg, a senior research associate at the Center for Research in Human Development and Education, is a nationally recognized expert on adolescence. He has noted, “Adolescence is not an inherently difficult period. Psychological problems, problem behavior, and family conflict are no more common in adolescence than at any other stage of the life cycle. To be sure, some adolescents are troubled and some get into trouble. But the great majority (almost 9 out of 10) do not.” Steinberg, who is also professor of psychology at Temple University, added: “The problems we have come to see as a ‘normal’ part of adolescent development—drugs, delinquency, irresponsible sex, opposition to any and all authority—are not normal at all. They are both preventable and treatable. The bottom line is that good kids don’t suddenly go bad in adolescence.”<sup>3</sup>

The reality is that most of what we read in the newspaper and hear via the media deals with the 10 percent of troubled teenagers—most of whom were also troubled children. You and your teenager *can* have a positive relationship. That’s what your teenager wants, and I assume that is what you want. In this chapter, we’re going to look at what I believe to be the most important aspect of that relationship, namely, meeting your teen’s need for emotional love. If this need is met, then the teenager can effectively navigate the cultural waters that we talked about in chapter 1.

When teens know their parents love them, they will have confidence to face the negative influences in our culture that would keep them from becoming mature, productive adults. Without the love of parents, the teenager is far more likely to succumb to the evil influences of drugs, promiscuity, and violence. In my opinion, nothing is more important than the parent learning how to effectively meet the teen's emotional need for love.

What do I mean by “emotional love”? Deep within the soul of the teenager is the desire to feel connected, accepted, and nurtured by parents. When this happens, the teenager feels loved. When the teen does not feel connected, accepted, and nurtured, his inner emotional tank is empty—and that emptiness will greatly affect the behavior of the teen. Let me describe each of these in more depth.

## **THE TEEN'S DESIRE FOR CONNECTION**

### ***The Presence of Parents***

Much has been written about the importance of the young child “bonding” to the parents. Most child psychologists agree that if this emotional bonding does not take place, the child's emotional development will be plagued with feelings of insecurity. The opposite of connection is abandonment. If the young child's parents are not available because of death, divorce, or desertion—obviously emotional bonding cannot take place.

The prerequisite for bonding is the presence of the parents. In short: *bonding requires time together.*

In the teenage years, the same principles are true. Parents who are around little because of divorce, work schedules, etc., jeopardize the teenager's sense of feeling connected to parents. It is a simple reality that for a teen to feel connected, and thus loved by the parents, they

must spend time together. The teen who feels abandoned will wrestle with the question, “What’s wrong with me that my parents don’t care about me?” If parents want their teenager to feel loved, they must make time to be with them.

### ***The Connecting Power of Communication***

Obviously, physical proximity between parents and teens does not *necessarily* result in connection. Emotional connectedness requires communication. You may be a stay-at-home mother, or a father at home on a two-week vacation, and still be disconnected if there is little communication.

I was encouraged many years ago, while examining a research project, to find that 71 percent of teens surveyed indicated they eat at least one meal a day with family. But my encouragement was short-lived when I discovered that fully half of all teens surveyed watched television the last time they had dinner with their parents. In addition, one in four said they listened to the radio while 15 percent read a book, magazine, or newspaper while dining.<sup>4</sup> Today they’d be texting. It appears that most parents are not using mealtimes as a means for building connection with teenagers.

In my opinion, the meal table is one of the best places to build emotional connectedness with teenagers. What teenager doesn’t love to eat? A little talking with parents is a small price to pay for a good meal. If your family does not fall into the 71 percent who has at least one meal together every day, let me encourage you to work toward this ideal. And for those who are eating, but not talking, let me suggest a new guideline for family mealtimes. Announce to the teenagers and younger children that you are starting a new tradition at mealtimes: “First, we talk to God (yes, teach your children to be grateful for their

food), then we talk to each other; after that, if we wish, we can revert to TV, computers, or smartphones, but leave the screens off the table!

Begin by having someone volunteer to thank God for the food and the person or persons who prepared it. Then each family member shares with the others three things that happened in their life that day and how they feel about them. *Rule #1*: when one family member is talking, the others are listening empathetically. *Rule #2*: the others may ask questions to clarify what they are hearing, but they don't give advice unless the person who is sharing solicits it.

This one new tradition may be enough to help you establish and maintain a sense of connectedness with your teenager.

## **THE TEEN'S DESIRE FOR ACCEPTANCE**

### ***The Power of Acceptance . . . and Rejection***

A second element of emotional love is feeling accepted by parents. One fourteen-year-old boy said, "The main thing I like about my parents is that they accept me for who I am. They don't try to make me like my older sister." This teenager feels loved, and this love comes from being accepted by his parents.

"My parents like me. I'm OK." These are the messages played in the mind of the teenager who feels accepted. The opposite of acceptance is rejection. Its messages are "They don't like me. I'm not good enough for them. They wish I were different." The child who feels rejected obviously does not feel loved.

Anthropologist Ronald Rohner has studied rejection in more than a hundred cultures around the world. His findings are clear that although cultures differ in how they express rejection, rejected children everywhere are at heightened risk for numerous psychological problems. These problems range from low self-esteem to deficient

moral development, and from difficulty in handling aggression to confused sexual identity. Rohner believes that the effects of rejection are so strong that he calls rejection a “psychological malignancy that spreads throughout a child’s emotional system, wreaking havoc.”<sup>5</sup>

James Garbarino, professor of human development at Cornell University, has spent many years studying the inner life of violent teenagers. He concluded that the feeling of rejection is a major element in the psychological makeup of the violent teenager. Often this rejection grows out of being compared with another sibling.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Accepting the Teen . . . Correcting the Behavior***

Many parents think showing total acceptance is wrong. Bob, a concerned parent of two teenagers, spoke with great candor when he said to me, “Dr. Chapman, I don’t understand how you can accept a teenager when his behavior is despicable. I don’t want my teens to feel rejected, but frankly I don’t like their behavior and I don’t like them when they engage in that behavior. Maybe I am rejecting them, but in my heart that is not what I feel. I feel love and concern. I don’t want them to destroy their lives.”

Bob was speaking for thousands of parents who have not yet learned how to communicate acceptance while at the same time correcting the misbehavior of their teen. We will explore this further as we get into the five love languages of teenagers.

For the moment, let me seek to clarify our goal by using a theological illustration. Paul, a first-century apostle of the Christian faith, said of God, “He made us accepted in the Beloved.”<sup>7</sup> He was alluding to the central Christian doctrine that the God who is holy has accepted us who are unholy because He sees us as being a part of Himself because we have accepted His Son—the Beloved. Since we

have accepted His Son—God has accepted us. Paul’s idea is that though God is not always pleased with our behavior, God is always pleased with us because we are His children. As parents, this is what we are trying to do. We want to communicate with our children that we are happy to be their parents, no matter what, without respect to their behavior patterns. This is what we typically refer to as *unconditional love*.

**Unconditional love says, “You are my son, you are my daughter, and I will never reject you.”**

Unconditional love says, “I love you, I care about you. I am committed to you because you are my child. I don’t always like what you do, but I always love you and care about your well-being. You are my son or daughter and I will never reject you. I will always be here doing what I believe is best for you. I will love you no matter what.”

Ken Canfield, founder of the National Center for Fathering, said, “Never forget the great question of adolescence: ‘Who am I?’ Your teenager will have to answer that question for himself. What he wants to hear from you is ‘Whoever you end up being, I still love you.’” Then Canfield noted a great fear every teen has: “Never forget the great fear of adolescence—‘Am I normal?’ The likely answer to that question is ‘Yes.’ But what the teenager wants to hear from his dad is ‘Even if you were abnormal, I’d still love you.’”<sup>8</sup>

Canfield was talking about unconditional acceptance and unconditional love. I will give other suggestions later, but let me share a simple approach that may greatly affect the way your teenager hears your verbal messages of guidance or correction. Before you give your profound statement of what you wish your teenager would do, always preface it with these words (or some other words like these that are better suited

to your personality), “I love you very much. I will love you even if you don’t follow my advice. But, because I love you, I must give you my advice.” Then share your words of wisdom. Your teenager needs to hear that you accept him even when you don’t approve of his behavior.

### **THE TEEN’S DESIRE TO BE NURTURED**

The third aspect of loving your teenager is nurturing him or her. Nurture has to do with feeding the inner spirit of your teen. We nurture plants by enhancing the soil in which they are planted. We nurture teenagers by enhancing the climate in which they grow. Teenagers who grow up in a warm, caring, encouraging, and positive emotional climate are more likely to produce beautiful flowers and luscious fruit as they reach maturity.

#### ***Never Abuse***

The opposite of nurture is abuse. An abusive atmosphere is like spraying poison on the soul of a teenager. Teenagers who receive hostile, cutting, harsh, or demeaning words from their parents will eventually make it to adulthood, but the scars of verbal abuse will follow them for a lifetime. Parents who indulge in physical abuse by slapping, shoving, pushing, beating, or shaking their teenager may well harm the young person’s physical development, and they will at least harm the teen’s emotional development, which will make their lives as adults far more difficult.

Few things are more detrimental to the teenager’s developing psyche than abuse. Teenagers draw conclusions based on what they observe and what they experience at the hands of their parents. Research indicates that most teenagers who turn violent have themselves been traumatized by abuse and are starved for love. James

Garbarino describes violent boys in this manner: “They take drugs. They engage in violence. They steal. They gorge themselves on sex. They join gangs and cults and when no one is watching or listening to them, they suck their thumbs and cry themselves to sleep.”<sup>9</sup> Behind many violent teenagers is an abusive parent. *Love does not abuse; love nurtures.*

### ***Be a Nurturing Parent***

To nurture your teenager first requires that you nurture yourself. If you are going to create a supportive and positive climate in which your teenager can accomplish the developmental tasks of adolescence, you will first have to grow in the areas of your own emotional weaknesses. The fact is that many parents of teenagers did not grow up in nurturing families; consequently, they have developed negative patterns of responding to teenagers, which come across as abusive. If you see this in yourself, the first step is to deal with your own pain and learn to process your own anger.

This may involve reading books on resolving anger,<sup>10</sup> joining support groups through your local church or community center, or going for personal counseling. It is never too late to deal with the dark side of your own history. Your teenagers deserve your best, and your best is not possible until you have dealt with your past.

Nurturing parents have a positive attitude. I do not mean that they deny the realities of life, but they choose to see the hand of God behind the scenes of human events. They look for the sun behind the clouds and they communicate this spirit to their teenagers. Nurturing parents are encouraging, looking for the positive things their teenagers do and say, and commending them.

Nurturing parents are caring parents—constantly looking for ways to enhance the lives of their teenagers. In the chapters that follow, we



will look at the five love languages and help you to discover the primary love language of your teenager. Speaking this language is the most powerful way to nurture your child's inner spirit and to enhance his life.

### ***Understand the Impact of an Empty Tank***

One of the reasons emotional love is so important for your teenager is because it affects every other aspect of his life. When the teenager's love tank is empty he thinks, "No one really cares about me." Motivation for learning is dissipated. "Why should I study at school? No one cares what happens to me anyway." High school guidance counselors hear statements like these every day.

An empty love tank also affects the teen's ability to empathize with others. When the teen does not feel loved, he will have greater difficulty appreciating how his negative actions might affect someone else's feelings. Research indicates that most violent juvenile delinquents display very little empathy.<sup>11</sup> Empathy is one of the foundations for what Daniel Goleman calls "emotional intelligence." He defines emotional intelligence as the ability to read emotions in others, to communicate effectively in the nonverbal realm, to handle the ups and downs of daily life, and to have appropriate expectations for relationships.<sup>12</sup> Thus, lack of emotional intelligence affects the teen's ability to relate positively to others.

Lack of empathy, in turn, affects the teenager's development of the conscience and moral judgments. It is during the teenage years that the standard for one's conscience is being internalized. In the childhood years, standards are given by parents. Now the teen is wrestling with her own concept of what is moral and immoral. If, because of a lack of emotional love, she is not able to empathize with others, there will be little sense that it is wrong to hurt others. In the realm of spirituality,

if the child's emotional need for love has not been met, then the theological idea of a loving God will have little meaning to the teenager. This is one reason why teenagers who are starved for emotional love will often turn away from the parent's religious beliefs and practices.

In summary, the teenager's intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual developments are greatly enhanced if the teenager has significant amounts of emotional love. Conversely, the teen is greatly impaired in all of these areas if the emotional need for love is not met.

### **YOUR NEAREST NEIGHBOR**

Sociologists, psychologists, and religious leaders all agree that the most fundamental need of the teenager is to feel emotional love from the significant adults in his life. David Popenoe, professor of sociology at Rutgers University and cochair of the Council on Families in America, wrote, "Children develop best when they are provided the opportunity to have warm, intimate, continuous, and enduring relationships with both their fathers and their mothers." Psychologists Henry Cloud and John Townsend add, "There is no greater ingredient of growth for your youngster than love." And in *Lost Boys*, James Garbarino asked: "What tools does a boy have to make sense of his life if he has no sense of being loved and appreciated?"<sup>13</sup>

When the religious leaders of that day asked Jesus of Nazareth, "Which is the greatest commandment in the law?" the founder of the Christian faith replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."<sup>14</sup> Thus, Jesus summarized all the teachings of the Old Testament books of law and the words of the Jewish prophets in

these two commandments. I would like to suggest that the teenager living in your house is your nearest neighbor.

### **“MY WHOLE LIFE I FELT ALONE”**

If parents and other significant adults do not meet a teen’s need for love, he or she will go looking for love in all the wrong places. After a sixteen-year-old killed his mother and then opened fire at his high school in Pearl, Mississippi, killing three and wounding seven, he later told an ABC News correspondent that he felt so isolated and rejected in his community that he was easily drawn into a group of boys who were self-proclaimed Satanists. He said, “My whole life I felt outcasted, alone. Finally, I found some people who wanted to be my friends.”

Garbarino adds, “Emotionally needy boys who are rejected by teachers and parents are prime targets for anti-social older youth and adults. These negative role models recruit vulnerable boys, and they exchange self-affirmation for loyalty to the anti-social cause. Many violent and troubled boys have stories of how they were befriended by older boys who accepted them in return for their involvement in criminal enterprises.”<sup>15</sup>

After years of trying to understand violent and delinquent teenagers, Garbarino concluded, “Nothing seems to threaten the human spirit more than rejection, brutalization, and lack of love.”<sup>16</sup>

Nothing is more important in parenting teenagers than learning how to effectively meet the teen’s need for emotional love. What you are about to read in the next five chapters will introduce you to the five basic love languages—the five most effective ways to fill up the emotional love tank of your teenager. Then I will address the matter of discovering your teen’s primary love language—the one language that is most effective in meeting his/her emotional need for love. As

I have shared this material in parenting lectures across the country, many parents have found that the application of these truths has radically changed the behavior of their teens and has given the parents feelings of deep satisfaction that whatever else they are doing as parents, they are being effective in meeting their teens' most important emotional need. That's my desire for you as well.

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