

DETERMINING YOUR CHILD'S LOVE LANGUAGE

Once parents understand these benefits, the challenge is to recognize and decipher the sometimes-cryptic clues given by kids with special needs and disabilities. Parents who were asked how they determined their child's primary love language described the processes they used. Those descriptions were strikingly similar. Whether the child was verbal or nonverbal, developmentally delayed or physically disabled, behaviorally challenged or compliant, parents first used trial and error followed by keen observation.

For couples who were familiar with the love languages when they became parents, trial and error was natural and organic. They used all five languages with their children from birth. They observed how their children responded to each language as they grew and developed.

Parents who implemented the languages when their children were older took the more intentional approach outlined in *The 5 Love Languages of Children*. They used one love language at a time. For a few weeks they observed and often jotted down their child's responses in a journal before moving on to another language. Once all five had been tested, the child's responses revealed their primary love language.¹

The responses of children with verbal communication deficits can be harder to interpret. Such was the case for the parents raising a daughter who lives with autism. She is verbal, but finds it difficult to express her likes and dislikes with words. So, her parents asked themselves three questions as they observed their daughter. What calms her? What motivates her? Where does she choose to spend her time? Using those criteria, they discovered that physical touch is her primary love language, followed by words of affirmation. "It took a while, and the main criteria was what calmed her," her mom recalls. "She loves to be squeezed, and she loves it when we take off her shoes and rub her feet. Not with lotion, but squeezing them."

THREE QUESTIONS FOR DETERMINING A CHILD'S LOVE LANGUAGE

1. What calms my child with special needs?
2. What motivates my child?
3. Where does my child choose to spend time?

Another set of parents describes how they identified their daughter's top two love languages, even though she is nonverbal and has autism. They adopted her knowing that her first sixteen months in an orphanage meant she could have attachment and bonding issues. They understood that their daughter needed time and space to form connections and develop trust on her own terms.

In her first months with her new family, the child cried inconsolably at night. She slowly started to accept comfort, but at arm's length. Her mom recounts the clues that led them to identify their daughter's primary love language as physical touch, followed closely by words of affirmation. "Eventually, she became fiercely and intensely physical. Her hugs were so strong and tight that it felt like she would pop my head off. She has never wanted us to sit and read to her, she has zero interest in things and gifts, and she could care less what we do or don't do for her. But if we want to see her light up like fireworks on the Fourth of July, we spend time holding her or dancing, hugging, and cuddling.

Add a few words of encouragement on top of that, and you will see a beautiful, ecstatically beaming child.”

Sometimes, however, even the most observant and intentional parents aren’t able to pinpoint the primary love language of a child with severe and complex special needs. Such is the case for the parents of a twelve-year-old daughter with developmental delays and complex communication needs, as well as feeding and mobility issues. Because their daughter is nonverbal, her parents don’t know what her love language is. Sometimes they think it’s quality time, but they aren’t sure because she needs someone with her to do almost everything. They’re tempted to dismiss gifts as her language because she throws toys on the ground, but that behavior could be caused by sensory issues. Sometimes they think physical touch isn’t her language because she pushes her parents away, but her response might be a reaction to having her personal space invaded. She smiles proudly when they praise her for doing something good, so they wonder if her language is words of affirmation.

This family’s dilemma will resonate with many parents. Hopefully, their solution will, too. Since their daughter’s primary love language is elusive, they speak all five languages with her. When she reaches for them, they touch her. If she wheels up and wants to engage, they give her all their attention. While performing almost constant acts of service, they explain what they are doing and why. If she reaches for a wipe when being changed, they thank her for her help. Her mom offers a final piece of advice: “You can do just about anything to demonstrate all five languages. Just do it all with love.”

1. Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell, *The 5 Love Languages of Children* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2012), 113–22.

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