

7 “A”s

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THAT TRANSFORM

Seven Steps to a
Loving Family Relationship

By Josh and Dottie McDowell

1. Affirmation
2. Acceptance
3. Appreciation
4. Availability
5. Affection
6. Approach
7. Accountability



GOD'S LOVE IS
UNFAILING

*“For I am always aware of your unfailing love,
and I have lived according to your truth.”*

(Psalm 26:3)

1. Affirmation

Romans 12:15 *“Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep.”*

One of the most effective ways of identifying with your children, even when you don’t fully understand them, is to affirm their feelings. To affirm means to “validate or confirm.”

When we affirm the feelings of our young people, we give them a sense of *authenticity*.

Notes:

In John 11, we read about the death of one of Jesus’ good friend Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary. Not only does Jesus grieve the loss of His friend, He also validates the grief of Martha and Mary by weeping with them...

John 11:33–35 *“When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled. ‘Where have you put him?’ he asked them. They told him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Then Jesus wept.”*

It is not always easy, however, to appreciate our children’s emotions and to affirm what we see as silly or dramatic. Many parents weren’t affirmed themselves as children and it feels uncomfortable and unnatural to try to affirm their own child. The common and natural responses to dealing with the emotions of a young person can more often be barrier-builders rather than bridge-builders. There is the temptation to try to “fix” whatever is causing their emotional turmoil with responses like, “There are three things you could have done...” or with the encouragement to suck it up—“Don’t let it get to you!” Sometimes, parents resort to the blame game. “Your friend is just insecure, that’s why she talked about you behind your back!” Has anyone ever responded to you in one of these ways? How did it make you feel? Invalidated? Wrong? Guilty, like YOU are the problem?

However, by affirming the emotions of our children, we tell them that they are real individuals with valid feelings. When we identify with their feelings of excitement or disappointment, we let them know that they are understood for who they really are—authentic human beings.

1. Affirmation

Dottie:

Some time ago, I talked to a very discouraged California mother of a teenage boy. She shared that he had just gotten his drivers permit and was beginning to drive. She and her husband took him out to practice driving and he did beautifully. This conscientious mom wanted to capture the moment to encourage her son so she said something like, "Great job! I'm proud of how carefully you're driving!" Then she nudged her husband to encourage him to say something positive, but he got angry at her, conveying that it is silly to say something that he felt was simply so obvious.

This mom was very discouraged. She said he almost never affirms their son and spends a great amount of time in conflict with him, griping and emphasizing his faults and any mistakes, rather than praising him. She described her son as an excellent student, a leader in his youth group, and excellent in sports. She said he appears confident and outgoing to everyone else, but underneath she knows he is suffering because he is getting no affirmation from the most important man in his life – his dad. Dads, do you see that this dad is missing the boat? Do you see that he is missing opportunities to encourage his son? I urge you not to make this same mistake. Choose to be a dad who looks for opportunities to affirm your children. It is a decision that will pay off for the rest of your life and the lives of your children. I'm so glad my dad and my husband made this choice. I hope you will, too.

A turning point for me in learning affirmation was a conversation I had with my wife after one of her friends said something hurtful to her. My normal response would have been to "fix it" or quote the Bible to her, but for some reason, I responded with affirmation. I said, "I'm so sorry, Honey. That must have really hurt you. I'm really sad for you..." She responded in a way that completely surprised me! She threw her arms around me and said, "Thanks!" Wow! She never responded like that when I gave her a verse from the Bible to think about or when I tried to "fix" her problem. At that point, I learned that living out Scripture far outweighs merely quoting Scripture.

Notes:

2. Acceptance

Romans 15:7 *“Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.”*

Acceptance is embracing people for who they are rather than for what they do. Your acceptance helps your kids believe that you will still love them no matter what happens.

When we accept young people for who they are, we give them a sense of security.

Notes:

God has accepted us through Christ. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. We have been accepted not based on anything we have done, but because of what Christ did on the cross. And so likewise, we get the joy of accepting others, especially our children.

How did God accept us through Christ? While we were sinners, while we were at our worst, while we were enemies with God, He sacrificed the ULTIMATE sacrifice, His Son. Christ served those that betrayed Him, He loved to the end, and He gave His very life. We are called to accept our children when they are at their worst, when they betray us, when they use us and manipulate us. Think about the prodigal son. He disowned his father, wasted all of his inheritance, stained the family name, and yet when he came back, his father ran to him, embraced him, and welcomed him home. That is a father with unconditional acceptance toward his children!

My son Sean was on a baseball team when he was ten years old. The day before the first game, I took fifteen ice cream sundae coupons to the coach to give to the kids after they lost their first game. I told the coach that my love and acceptance of my child is not based on him playing baseball and winning, but he is my son, created in the image of God with infinite value, dignity, and worth. The coach thought I was crazy, thinking he should give them to the kids after their first win, but he did what I asked. The response from the kids was tremendous! A few of the boys thanked me for the ice cream sundaes and actually said these words: “Wow! It doesn’t matter to you if we win or lose, you love us anyway!”

2. Acceptance

Dottie:

I have so many memories of my folks telling me, “Dorothy, don’t ever forget this: There is nothing that you could ever do—NOTHING—that could cause us to stop loving you.” They told me this over and over when I was growing up, and it was simply normal for me to hear those words. Okay... Fast forward to one day when I was 16 and had just gotten my driver’s license. I was driving home from my best friend’s house and clearly recall approaching a really busy intersection and telling myself, “Be careful.” The next thing I knew, my car collided with a little Volkswagen bug, and I was sitting, unhurt, in a destroyed car. To this day, I honestly don’t have the slightest idea HOW it happened! But to say that I was shook up—and extremely embarrassed—was an enormous understatement.

When my dad arrived, I was NEVER so happy to see anyone in my life! He gave the police all the information that they needed and took me home.

I want you to know that my dad kept telling me that the only thing that mattered was that I was okay and not hurt. He never once asked me what in the world I was thinking, if I had been “watching” the road, if the radio was on, or was too loud, or any other “logical” question that a dad might ask a 16-year-old who had just wrecked the car. Never once did he mention how expensive the car was or that this would cause our insurance rates to go up!

This was a concrete and compassionate demonstration of the unconditional acceptance. If I ever felt like I needed acceptance, (and not a lecture or a million questions!) it was on that day! Do your kids know that you accept them unconditionally? They need to.

After affirming my children, their choices, decisions, and unique talents, I follow up saying, “I love and accept you because you are my daughter/son, created in the image of God with infinite value, dignity, and worth. If you never made a good decision, if you got into drugs, got pregnant, failed out of school, etc., it would not affect my love and acceptance of you, because you are my daughter/son.” This gives children a phenomenal sense of security, and the more secure my children become with me, the more vulnerable and transparent they are with me.

Notes:

3. Appreciation

Matthew 3:17 *“And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.’”*

While acceptance of young people tells them that their being matters, expressing our appreciation to them says that their *doing* matters too. Our appreciation conveys to young people that they are valued and that their accomplishments do make a difference to someone.

When we express appreciation to young people, we give them a sense of significance.

Notes:

God visibly delighted in His Son...

Isaiah 42:1 *“Look at my servant, whom I strengthen. He is my chosen one, who pleases me.”*

God also delights in us...

Psalms 18:19 *“He led me to a place of safety; he rescued me because he delights in me.”*

As God appreciates and affirms the work of His children, we are to appreciate and affirm the work of our children.

Prior to learning and implementing this principle, I had been raising my children the way I thought the Bible taught, which was to catch my children when they were doing something wrong, then correct and discipline them. While this certainly needs to be done, it should be under the overall umbrella of catching them doing right things first. Again, it all comes back to a loving relationship.

Catch them doing things well, not only with their actions, but also in their attitude. Look for the situations where your child could have lost his/her cool but didn't. It has a profound impact on a child's behavior!

- “Thank you, Kelly, for putting your clothes in the hamper. Your mom will appreciate that.”
- “Katie, I so appreciate the effort you've put into your studies, and so does your mother.”
- “Thanks for cleaning the porch, Sean. Now, would you do the other half?”

3. Appreciation

Dottie:

When I think of communicating appreciation to children, I think back to when our grandson, Scottie, was 3 years old. At the time, his younger sister Shauna was still a baby, and Scottie was learning what it was like to be a big brother. Like most preschoolers, Scottie was a bit rough and tough with his baby sister when he tried to express affection toward her. He would hug her, and I would wonder if she would make it out alive! He would kiss her, and I would hold my breath! I sometimes felt like a referee when they were together, and my primary objective was just to keep the baby safe!

But this is where we, as adults, have ideal opportunities! When an older sibling does express sincere tenderness toward the new baby, it's our big chance to communicate appreciation and pride. You know how much we as adults enjoy heartfelt appreciation? Imagine how motivating it was to a three-year-old! So, when I saw Scottie being tender to his sister, I would say something like, "Wow Scottie! Grammy is sooooo proud of how gentle you are with your baby! You are such a big boy and such a remarkable brother. I sure am proud of you!" Experience has taught me that, even though it may take time, this expression of appreciation should help to motivate Scottie and encourage continued gentle behavior.

Even when your child might fail to meet your expectations, (or his/her own expectations), you can still turn it into an opportunity to express appreciation for their effort, attitude, or what they learned through it. I am convinced that the more I caught my son and three daughters doing things well and expressed appreciation, the less often I found myself catching them doing something wrong.

Catch your children doing something right! It will give them the love and security which they need, and it will make your job a whole lot easier!

Notes:

4. Availability

Psalm 145:18 *“The LORD is close to all who call on him, yes, to all who call on him in truth.”*

Expressing affirmation, acceptance, and appreciation to our kids is critical, but we can only do that if we make ourselves available to them. When we’re not available, we are saying in essence, “Yes, I love you, but other things still come ahead of you.”

When we make ourselves available to young people, we give them a sense of importance.

Notes:

In Matthew, Jesus is traveling around doing some mighty works. There was a group of parents trying to get Jesus to bless their children, but the disciples tried to turn them away. Jesus immediately corrected His disciples and said...

“Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like these children.”

Matthew 19:14

I cannot tell you how many times I have forsaken my children. “Not now, Sean. I have a talk to prepare.” “Katie, I have an appointment downtown... we’ll need to talk after I’m done.” “Maybe later Heather, I need to pack for the airport.” “Kelly, I’m exhausted, how about after dinner?” Every time I said things like that, I was communicating to my kids that they were not as important as whatever was on my agenda. It breaks my heart when I think about it now.

Dottie helped me see this. She told me something very profound that resonated deeply and caused me to weep. She said, “If you spend time with your children now, they will spend time with you later. If you love your children now, they will love you later.” What wisdom! Being there when your kids need you not only tells them they are important, it also keeps you relationally connected to them.

Don’t tell me you don’t have enough time for your kids. Everyone has the same amount of time. It’s 24 hours a day. Yet, we all do different things with those 24 hours. I want to tell you emphatically that there is nothing more important to your child than giving him or her your time and attention.

4. Availability

Dottie:

Several years ago, I was in the midst of a busy travel schedule, and I had three days out of the whole month at home to do laundry, iron, pack, visit the post office, the bank, the pharmacy, the grocery store, the doctor, etc.

As soon as I got home, our daughter Heather called, excited about moving into her first house as a college senior. She asked if I would take a day to help her move in, get some furniture for her room, and get her settled. After a quick tug-of-war in my mind, I knew that being with Heather was far more important.

She picked me up and we set off to find a mattress for a bed someone had given her. Then we searched all over town to find furniture on a college-budget. We then headed to home improvement store for paint, paintbrushes, sandpaper, a drop cloth, and those fashionable painting caps so that we could transform her new furniture into pieces of art. And WOW! If I do say so myself, they turned out amazing! She had an adorable room in her first house and I got to be a part of it!

It makes me sad to think of what I would have missed if I had chosen to do the “pressing” things I thought I had to do during those three days home. But, in light of eternity, which was more important? I now have the precious memory of sharing the excitement my daughter had moving into her first house and the memory of her saying to me, “Thanks, Mom! There is no one else in the world I would have rather done this with than you!” The memory of that day will last

Parents, if we want our children to listen to us on the critical subjects of sex, love, relationships, or any subject for that matter, we have to earn that right! And, we earn that right by initiating and aggressively and continuously pursuing a loving, trusting, patient, encouraging, and supportive relationship with our kids. If our children feel that we delight in them, then they are more likely to listen to what we say, more likely to stand up against peer pressure and more likely to adopt our values and beliefs.

The way kids spell the word *love* is T-I-M-E.

Notes:

5. Affection

1 John 4:7 *“Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God.”*

Every expression of affection to our kids through loving words and appropriate touch communicates that they are truly loved and worth loving.

When we show affection to young people, we give them a sense of lovability.

Notes:

Jesus displayed affection in a way that no one in His culture had displayed affection before. Jesus touched the leper, healed the bleeding woman, ate with tax collectors and whores, associated with Samaritans and women (a custom not common in that culture), delighted in the poor, and broke bread with His disciples. His affection and interest in people were not conditional on their looks, their personality, behavior, prestige, wealth, or decisions. He touched the unclean and delighted in sinners. Jesus came into our world in our bodily form, so he could relate to us and show affection towards us.

John 15:12 *“This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you.”*

Jesus was talking to his disciples here. How did he love them? Two chapters before, Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, a task reserved for servants.

Affection can be expressed through words and appropriate physical contact. We can say “I love you” to our children in a variety of different ways. It has been my personal goal to express verbal affection to my kids ten times a day. Appropriate physical expression is conveyed through a hug, kiss, peck on the cheek, arm around the shoulder, embrace, or holding your child’s hand. Affection speaks volumes to our children.

5. Affection

Dottie:

My mom was a genius at communicating affection to her children. She had so many creative ways to let us know how much she delighted in each one of us. One very powerful thing that she always did was to warmly greet us EVERY time we'd walk into her presence. It didn't matter if we had been gone for five hours or five minutes. The moment we'd walk in from being away from her, she'd grab that opportunity to communicate her delight in seeing us. She would greet us with an enthusiastic hello, a BIG hug, and always express eagerness to listen to anything we had to say. Did this help me understand that I was lovable and treasured? Absolutely!

So, because of my mom's example, when we had our children, I did the same thing that she had done. It made perfect sense to me! I had seen it modeled myself!

I didn't think too much about it until one of our daughters introduced me at a speaking engagement that I had. She mentioned that every time she'd come into a room where I was, I would greet her enthusiastically and affectionately. She then shared how much it always meant to her.

I was grateful for my mother's affectionate example to consistently communicate to her children how important we were to her with words and hugs. Let me encourage you to do the same. Be yourself; do it your own way. But look at each time your children appear as an opportunity to remind them how much they are cherished and adored by you. I don't believe that you can overdo it if it is done sincerely. Hey! Life is too short NOT to do this!

Our kids are crying out for love. Even if their parents truly do love them, many kids are unsure that they are loved because their parents haven't displayed that love in tangible acts of affection. If our children are not finding their love and security in their own family, they will seek out other things to fill this natural void.

We are all created to find love and fulfillment in God as our Father. As parents, we are called to model that love and point our children towards the ultimate Father who delights in them.

Notes:

6. Approach

1 Corinthians 13:5 “. . . [Love] does not demand its own way . . .”

We need to find out what is significant to our kids, no matter how old they are, and dive into those interests with genuine enthusiasm. Naturally, these areas change with age.

When we step into our child’s world it says, “What I like my mother likes. What I am interested in my father is interested in.”

Notes:

Jesus is the ULTIMATE example of approaching someone else’s world.

Philippians 2:5-7 (ESV) “. . . Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”

Jesus entered into our brokenness, our fallen, dirty world to be with us, affirm us, accept us, and ultimately save us. Because Jesus entered our world, we are able to enter into the world of others, especially into the worlds of our children.

I can’t tell you how many times I played Barbie with our youngest daughter Heather. I would love to go shopping for a new Barbie dress or Ken outfit and surprise Heather when I got home. I got so upset when she and Ken split up, and now she has a new boyfriend! We would sit on the floor together and give Barbie a makeover, laughing and talking.

I don’t know how many times I read Spider Man and the Hulk to Sean! Whenever I was traveling for speaking engagements, I would find comic stores to see if I could pick up any comic books Sean didn’t have yet. I kept an updated list that I would show the salesperson, and they usually had three or four books on my list. I got so excited to surprise Sean when I got home from my trip, and we would sit on the floor together and read and act out the newest adventure of his superheroes.

6. Approach

Dottie:

Josh wanted to be an effective Dad, and he was determined. He understood that the best way to do that would be to jump into his children's worlds. For a dad who was on the road a great deal, this was not easy. But he did it! He pursued the things that captivated their hearts, whether it was basketball or ANY school sport, raising goats, youth group activities, collecting Star Wars figures, tea parties, shopping, coloring, snowmobiling. He was there for his kids and let them know, in many creative ways, that he was interested in their worlds.

One time our son Sean was playing an important high school basketball game. Josh was in Russia, but he flew 17 hours home for the game, and the moment it was over, raced back to LAX to travel the 17 hours back. Another time he flew in from Europe and literally, the moment he got home, took Katie and several of her junior high friends to Disneyland. Another time, at their request, Josh let Kelly and her best friend design his hair any way they wanted and then took them out to dinner, showing off his wild hairdo. That took real courage, but he became a hero to the girls! Another time, the very day that Heather lost her dog, he took her right out to get a new puppy.

I'm so proud of Josh and the decisions he made, in spite of the fact that he never saw these things modeled growing up. He chose to put his kids before his work and before his own interests. It paid off in the lives of our children. Fathers, have you made that decision with your children? It won't be long before they're gone and you can't go back. You'll always have work. You don't always have little people whom you can impact in a way that only you, as their dad, can.

Think about these questions... Why do we expect our children to go where we want to go, do what we want to do, eat at the restaurant we want to eat at, attend the activities that we choose, and watch the game we want to see? Our kids are human, too! It pays off big time when we give them opportunities to make some of those choices themselves. It conveys trust in them and shows we care about how they feel and what they want to do.

When you step into your child's world when they are young, they will step into your world when they are older. Approach your child's world!

Notes:

7. Accountability

Romans 14:12 *“Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.”*

Accountability provides the parameters within which a young person can operate safely and securely. Young people need the loving authority of parents and caring adults so they can learn to make responsible, right choices. Without parameters, there is only confusion and chaos.

When we provide loving accountability to young people, we give them a sense of responsibility.

Notes:

To connect relationally, we need to show our young people affirmation, acceptance, appreciation, availability, and affection. Still, if we do not balance these relational connecting points with loving limits and boundaries, young people will not learn responsibility.

We all have a responsibility toward God. As Paul says...

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”

2 Corinthians 4:7 (ESV)

This life is not about us, but about the God who made us. Jesus gave us the Great Commission and the Great Commandment (Matthew 28:18-20 and Matthew 22:34-40), which we are held accountable to fulfill. Look how the psalmist describes God’s boundaries...

“I will pursue your commands, for you expand my understanding.” **Psalm 119:32**

Whether we are disciplining a small child or an adolescent, the foundation to be able to discipline effectively is directly related to the quality of the relationship that we have already established with that child. The responsibility of developing a positive relationship in the first place is squarely in the hands of the parent. In the context of a loving and supportive relationship, rules will generally be far more effective and honored than in a relationship lacking in genuine affection and acceptance. As I often say,

Rules without relationships leads to rebellion.

7. Accountability

Dottie:

The thing that comes to mind when I think about accountability is how we handled dating curfews with our youngest child. The way that we would decide when to have her come in after a date was based on a system of accountability. Let me give you a little background.

When I was a teenager and was dating, my parents wanted to communicate to me that they trusted me explicitly. The way that they did this was by giving me the privilege to come home from a date when I felt it was a reasonable time. The only problem with this approach was that there were times, because of my immaturity and inexperience, that I clearly remember feeling like I didn't know how to handle certain situations. I remember wishing that I HAD a curfew so that I could conveniently blame my parents if I wanted to go home. I also remember thinking: "Hmmm . . . when I have teenagers, I'm going to give them a curfew so they could hopefully avoid the kinds of delicate situations that I remember facing."

So! Keeping that in mind, when it came to Heather's curfew, we involved her in the process. We'd first ask when the event would be over. Then we'd ask if they planned to go out to eat or anywhere else after the event. We'd ask her when she thought would be a fair curfew and then we'd set the time together. We also had the understanding that if she knew ahead of time that she couldn't make the curfew, she only had to call before that time to let us know that she would be late, so that we could readjust the expected arrival time. We felt like this was a fair "give and take," a situation where she had input, yet the final time was decided upon as a team. We felt that it was an effective way to communicate our trust in her while also encouraging accountability.

Our young people live in a world that offers innumerable opportunities for making choices that affect their future, whether positively or negatively. It is our responsibility as loving parents to help them make wise choices.

As we seek to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment by discipling our kids, we are pointing them towards their purpose on this earth as well.

Notes:

Conclusion

How's your relationship with your child? Which of the seven connecting points in this presentation seems most likely to help you? Choose one of the points—affirmation, acceptance, appreciation, availability, affection, approach, or accountability—and decide how you'll spend half an hour out of the next twenty-four working on that aspect of your relationship. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- **Affirm** your child by asking what was the hardest thing he or she had to do last week. Listen carefully, recognize the feelings he or she express.
- **Accept** your child by not mentioning something that usually irritates you, like a hairstyle, messy room, or an annoying habit.
- **Appreciate** your child by noticing something he or she has done right in the last week. Recognize that achievement with a homemade certificate, a handwritten note, a balloon, or a trophy from a party store.
- Show **affection** to your child by expressing it verbally or physically a dozen times in the space of one hour.
- Be **available** to your child by canceling something you enjoy regularly (watching your favorite TV show, working out, getting coffee with a friend, etc.) and replace it with an activity your son or daughter likes (watching a video together, shooting hoops, having a tea party with stuffed animals).
- **Approach** your child's world by listening to some of his or her favorite music together.
- Hold your child **accountable** by setting a deadline for a chore, and then help him or her to meet it.

Make a plan! Write it out on the next page! Describe what you'll do and when you'll do it. Do you need to prepare? For instance, if you're going to say something affectionate a dozen times in sixty minutes, you might want to list some ideas ahead of time. Also, consider coming up with a long-range plan. This is not a quick fix, but a never-ending adventure in learning to love your children effectively.

One final note: It is never too late. No matter the age of your child, it is never too late to foster a strong, loving relationship with him or her. Children at all ages have a great need for their parents' love, guidance, and support.

May God's own extraordinary love inspire and empower you for the journey ahead.

—Josh and Dottie McDowell

