



*How to Improve
Family Communication
with the 5 Love Languages*

DR. GARY CHAPMAN
WITH MARK & ANN TIMM

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A Zislar family Community



interview transcript

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Mark:

Doctor Gary Chapman, author, speaker and counselor has a passion for people and helping them form lasting relationships. He is the number one, New York Times best-selling author of The Five Love Languages series and the director of Marriage and Family Life Consultants. He travels the world presenting seminars, and his radio program airs on more than 400 stations. Gary, thank you so much for joining us here. You're the first expert in the Thrive community, the Ziglar Family Thrive community, and we are so excited for you to share with our community because here's something I want to share with you. That is, not only are we a fan of your work in relationships, but one of the number one challenges that our community faces is communication, and I know from reading your work that relationships and communication are absolutely synonymous. They really feed off of each other. So if you don't mind, the first question, I'd love to just dive into that topic, and just ask you, what is the connection between the love languages of family members and family communications.

Dr. Chapman:

Well, I think that when we feel loved in a family network, it's much easier to communicate our thoughts and our feelings. If we don't feel loved, whether it's a child that doesn't feel loved by the parents, or a husband that doesn't feel loved by his wife, it's much more difficult to share what you're thinking and what you're feeling because if you don't feel loved, you're not sure how they're going to respond. So communication is just much more difficult if you don't feel loved. So the love languages helps each of you know what makes the other person feel loved, so that you can keep their love tank full and with a full love tank, it creates a positive climate in which we can communicate on any topic. To me, that's the value. It creates that positive climate for communication.

Mark:

I love the love tank analogy. How about, how does the heart connect with the words that we're using to fill that love tank?



Dr. Chapman:

Well I think the words we speak and the tone of voice at which we speak them, and the manner in which we are looking at the person, all of these things are dynamics in terms of communicating. You know, if I'm screaming at you, I may be saying, "I love you!", but you don't get it because the way I'm saying it communicates that I do not love you. So I think when we understand each other's love language and then we choose ... because words is only one of the languages, but when we feel loved by the person, then we will find a way to share with them what's on our heart, what's troubling us, what might have created anger in us because of something they've done. But you can share those things much more freely when you feel secure in each other's love.

Mark:

I love that. I know there's a lot of our community that has children. Do you have kind of a general guide, at what age can kids begin to identify their own love language, and maybe what age have you seen that they can begin to talk about it?

Dr. Chapman:

Well you know I wrote a book for parents called *The Five Love Languages of Children*, and let me start from the parent's angle. I believe that a parent can discover a child's love language by the time they're four years old, sometimes even earlier if you just observe their behavior. How do they express love to you? For example, my son's love language is physical touch. When he was three or four years old, when I would come home in the afternoon or evening, he would run to the door, grab my legs, and jump all over me. He's touching me because he wants to be touched. Our daughter never did that. Our daughter would say, Daddy, come into my room, I want to show you something. She wanted my quality time, my undivided attention. So I think you can observe a child's love language very early.

Now, in terms of the child understanding the concept, I wrote a children's book called *A Perfect Pet for Peyton*. The storyline is, his parents take Peyton to a pet shop to get a pet for his birthday. They take his friends with him. The friends start looking at all the different animals in the pet shop, and each child identifies with a different animal. We use the animals to teach them the concept of the love languages, that one thing attracts one child, one attracts another. So when a child gets through with that book, and it's written to ages four through eight, so obviously in the younger age, the parent's reading the book to the child, but I believe that children during that period, four to eight years old, can come to understand the concept, I have a love language, Mommy has a love language, Daddy has a love language, Sister has a love language, and in our family, we learn how to speak each other's language. So you can teach a child this, really quite early.



Mark:

You know, this may be a loaded question, but what would you say is the most important thing for families to know about each of the five love languages?

Dr. Chapman:

Well, I think the most important thing is that, what makes one person feel loved doesn't make the other person feel loved. You have to understand that whatever language you speak, it's probably the one that you give to your family most often. For example, if words of affirmation is my language, it's what makes me feel loved, I probably use that most often in communicating to my wife and to my children. I'll verbally tell them I love them, and I will give them positive words. But what I have to understand is those words will not mean to one child what they would mean to another child, and I have to learn what makes that child feel loved, whether it's words of affirmation, whether it's gifts, whether it's acts of service, whether it's quality-time, or whether it's physical touch. And I have to give that child heavy doses of that primary love language if I want that child to feel loved. The question is not, to the parent, do you love your children. The question is do your children feel loved.

Mark:

I love that.

Dr. Chapman:

They don't feel loved if you don't speak their primary language.

Mark:

I absolutely love that, and I think that's gonna really resonate with everybody listening to this. I want to go just a little deeper on that topic and ask, have you found that family members with certain love languages struggle to communicate more, or how can they make the most of them to communicate better? Really touching on that communication side.

Dr. Chapman:

I think first of all, in speaking the love language, the one that's most difficult for you to speak is the one that's least important to you.

Mark:

Got it.



Dr. Chapman:

If you rank your love languages one through five, whatever is your number five, will be the hardest for you to communicate.

Mark:

That's so obvious. That's awesome.

Dr. Chapman:

In your mind you know, why would that mean anything? That's nothing. That's the hardest one that's to ... The learning curve is bigger for that. The reality and the good news is, we can learn to speak any of these languages as an adult because many of us did not receive all five of these. We didn't learn these things growing up. Now, we're discovering the concept, and we have to learn how to speak that language, but you can learn. That's the good news. When you do, give heavy doses of their primary love language. You sprinkle in the other four because you really want the child to learn how to receive and give love in all five languages. That's the healthiest adult. Most of us didn't get that, but we want our children to get that.

Mark:

I love that. I want to repeat that for everybody that's watching this, that the love language that we value the least is the one that we're going to have the most difficulty communicating, and that's why it's so important that we know them all, not just our own, if we really want to connect and communicate with our family. I'd love to try to maybe give some wins, some practical steps for families to use. Have you found that you've got maybe some activities that you would suggest as a family for using the five love languages to improve their family communications?

Dr. Chapman:

Well, you know one of the things you can do, once all of the family members have the concept and they understand about love languages, and they understand the love tank concept. Everybody has a love tank. You can say to your child or to your spouse, "On a scale of zero to ten, how full is your love tank?" Ten means I could not feel more loved. Zero means I don't feel loved at all. If they say anything less than ten, what you say is, "How could I fill it up? How could I help fill it?", and they give you a suggestion. Now they've given you information on what you can do that would fill up their love tank.

Now I have to say, when you use this with teenagers, teenagers will manipulate you and they will say oh my love language changed. My love language is gifts now, and I think what would probably fill my tank



up is if you buy me these shoes that I want. So remember, you're the parent. You don't buy everything the teenager asks you to buy simply because they tell you that would make them feel loved. You buy the things that you believe are important to them.

Mark:

All right, so I'm gonna keep you on the teenage topic for a minute because I shared with you before we started that I've got six teenagers at home. Okay, six teenagers. Let's assume for a second that they're not manipulating me, or anybody that's listening out there because I get it. I can see where gifts would all of a sudden pop into the picture at the teenage years. But often at the teenage years, at this age, they kind of seem reluctant to engage. I've seen at least in mine, they seem a little more reluctant to maybe engage in physical touch, or they get so absorbed in technology that they pull back emotionally from the parents. You know, can their love language change?

Dr. Chapman:

It's a good question. I'm often asked that question. I don't think the love language changes, but I think you have to learn new dialects of their language because whatever you have been doing, they consider childish. Let's say that their love language is physical touch, okay. So when they're little, eight, nine, ten, you hug them. You could even do it in public. You can hug them, and they'll receive it. You do that when they're teenagers, and they're going to push you away. Leave me alone. It doesn't mean that their love language changed, but you have to use different dialects of physical touch. Hit them on the shoulder, give them a high five, wrestle them to the floor. They will need touch, but it has to be different kinds of touch.

The same thing is true with words. When they're little, you're saying, "Oh, you're the sweetest little thing. I just love you so much, and I love you ..." You do that when they're a teenager and they're gonna say no, no, no, no, no. They still need words of affirmation. They just have to be different kinds of words. So every one of the languages, you'll have to learn new dialects when they get to be teenagers.

Now, there are other dynamics with teenagers. One is that their emotions are going like this. So on physical touch for example, I say this for parents: if your teenager walks in the room, but they stand on the other side of the room, don't go over there and touch them. They want that distance. If they walk in the room and come up closer to you, it's okay to touch them, to hug them. They are developing independence, and at one juncture they want to be apart from you. At another juncture, they want to be close to you. When they're angry, don't walk over and hug them, or you might get slugged. That's not the time to go them.



What you do when they're angry is you listen to them and you say, now let me make sure I'm hearing what you're saying. You're angry because ... You listen to them, find out why they're angry, try to put yourself in their shoes, so you can eventually say you know, I think I understand why you're angry, and if I were in your shoes, I'd probably be angry too. Wow, now you're their friend. Now, let me give you my perspective. Now as a parent you can give your perspective because you've heard them out and you've affirmed their feelings of anger. So the love language I don't think changes, but you have to learn new dialects when they get to be teenagers.

Mark:

I'm gonna stay on the teenage topic just a bit because you did a great job of giving us some practical tools of how to engage with a teenager once we know their love language. I know you wrote a book on the love languages for teenagers, so before we leave teenagers, I just want to ask you for a little bit deeper dive there and say, for the parents listening that have pre-teens or teens, those relationships can really be strained during that period of time. Do you have some words of encouragement, or just maybe even an example of how when a parent takes the time to understand the five love languages, how it can improve the connection with their pre-teen or teen when it seems like that connection has been ... I mean, it seems sometimes like it's been severed, certainly strained, so it seems like it would help if you kind of speak to parents on what that can feel like because I know lots of us long to have that connection with our teens that we once had.

Dr. Chapman:

Yeah. Well, I think we have to first of all as parents, accept the reality that our teenagers are moving toward independence. Now, they're not independent, but they're moving toward independence. In fact, we want them to be independent by the time they're 18 because they're going off to university and are gonna live on their own. They're gonna join the military, so we want them to be independent. So we have to recognize that, that's a process. They're going to say to you, I don't want you to walk with me to the mall. Let me out of the car here. I want to go in by myself. They might not want to go see grandmother. They'll say, I don't want to go down there. It's boring down there. You're gonna have some of that, okay. Don't allow that to become a barrier between the two of you.

You know their love language. You speak their love language while they're teenagers. You go where they are in terms of their interests. If you're gonna give them quality time, you'll have to go where they are because they're not gonna come to you. If they're into music, then you go to music. You can talk about



music and they'll talk music with you. If they're into sports, you go to sports, and they'll talk sports with you. So you can give them quality time, but you have to go to where they are. So I think understanding your teenager's love language and continuing to speak it, and not getting turned off when they say things to you that are hurtful and painful. Just recognize, they're in the process of becoming an adult and I'm gonna have to walk with them through the process. The important thing is not to let your own anger get out of control and say nasty hurtful things to your teenagers. When you do that, you need to go back and apologize. I say when you do that, because you probably will.

Mark:

It happens.

Dr. Chapman:

I've looked back on my own life, okay. You probably will, and you need to apologize. When you apologize to your teenager and say, "I'm sorry I lost my temper. A father should never talk to a son the way I talked to you, and I hope you know I don't mean those things I said about you. I love you very much, and I let my anger get out of control, and I hope you can forgive me." Even if they don't say, I forgive you, they walk away hearing what you're saying. Now sometimes parents will say, if you apologize to teenagers, won't they lose respect for you? I say no. They will gain respect for you.

Mark:

I love that.

Dr. Chapman:

They already know that what you did is wrong. They know that. They feel hurt already. When you apologize, you open the door to the possibility that they will forgive you, and you can move down the road. Also, you're giving them a model because they're gonna need to learn how to apologize, to you and to other people because they're not perfect either. I think being open and honest about our own failures with our teenagers will go a long ways in keeping the bond between the two of us.

Mark:

I love that. That's such great advice, even beyond the five love languages, just the dynamics of parents and children and teenagers, preteens, so that's awesome. Now, I'm gonna admit something to you. As we've been working together, I've talked to a lot of people and so many people have read The Five Love Languages, but I hear often they say, "I need to read that again." My question is, what do you suggest for



parents who've read your books and want to apply their understanding of the love languages, but have a hard time following through consistently with what you're teaching. They know it's good. They know it's right. It's just they're having trouble following through consistently. What kind of advice do you give to them?

Dr. Chapman:

Well, let's face it. We are all creatures of habit, and the easiest thing in the world, is to speak love in my own language. It's more difficult to learn to speak the other language, so it's gonna take time to where you feel even comfortable in speaking some of these love languages, but it takes effort. Just like if you're learning another verbal language, learning Spanish or German, it's gonna take time for you to learn how to do that, but if you really are motivated to learn how to communicate to another person in another language, then you will do it.

The same thing is true with love. So it's a matter of understanding the importance of it. There are few things more important to a child or a teenager, than feeling loved by their parents. Now obviously there are other things that are important, but I don't know anything more important than making sure that child feels loved. I would just say, first of all you have to, in your own mind say, this is priority for me. I'm going to learn how to do this, and it's true in a marriage as well of course. We may revert, you know, we get real busy and we forget to speak their language, and then wake up and realize, oh man, it's been a long time since I've really spoken their language. That's okay, then let's dig in. You know, let's do it.

Another thing would be to put some little post-it notes on your desk at work or whatever. You know, Mary needs this and John needs this, and my wife needs this, just reminders. These are reminders of you that I need to keep this on the front burner, and I need to be communicating love to them in a language that they understand.

Mark:

I love that. We actually engaged our community and gave them a chance to offer up some of these questions, so they're coming straight from the community. This happens to come from one of our community members, Sarah. She said if she got the chance to sit here where I am and ask you a question, she would ask this: How should parents respond to children when they're upset and say things like, you only do this to me, or it's because you love him more, or her more, or I'm the only one that has to do this chore. In other words, they're comparing what they see as more love being shown to another child or a sibling. What kind of advice do you give to parents that are facing that kind of a response from their children?



Dr. Chapman:

First thing I think I would say to that child, whether it's a child or a teenager is, "Tell me about it." Tell me about it. By nature, we want to come back and say that's not true.

Mark:

We want to be defensive.

Dr. Chapman:

That's right, we get defensive. The best thing you can do when a child is upset and saying to you, that you love them more than you love me is you say tell me about it, explain it to me. I want to understand what you're saying, and let them tell you. Try to put yourself in their shoes. Try to look at it through their eyes and ask them questions about it to make sure you're getting the point. Then you can say to them, "You know, I guess I can see why you might think that. That makes sense to me. I'm gonna give some thought to that. I appreciate you sharing that with me." Wow, I was heard. Especially teenagers, teenagers want to be heard.

I remember when my son said to me, when he was a teenager one time he said, "Dad, I'm gonna do what you say. I just want you to hear me." You know, and I think that's the heart of most teenagers. If they feel heard by their parents and not shot when they say something. You know, the parent doesn't shoot them back, but they try to understand them, you're gonna find they're gonna respect you. Maybe you have been showing deference to one and then not to them, but at least they're revealing their heart to you. They're telling you my love tank is empty, and it looks like his is full. So listening is the biggest thing and trying to understand, and then say that I understand. I can see what you're saying, and I can see that, that makes sense. I'm gonna give some thought to that.

Mark:

Another question is that, the reality of the world we live in Dr. Chapman, is there are a lot of blended families out there. That very nature of the word blend, whether it's a good word or a bad word, the families struggle. It's a hard process to go through. Have you seen families be able to use the love language to really help to solidify that blend or strengthen that bond, when two families that weren't born together come together, and how have you seen that work?

Dr. Chapman:

Well, you are right. It's much more difficult in a blended family than it is in a family where we're all one



family, but let's face it. Children who have gone through the divorce of their parents, and that doesn't mean all blended families are started because of divorce. Sometimes it was the death of a parent. But when they've gone through either the death of a parent or the divorce of their parents, they've gone through some trauma. They've gone through deep, emotional trauma. Now, somebody else comes into their life that you fall in love with, and they may not be in love with them. Now, you're asking me to love them? I don't even know them. Or they're reaching out to me acting like they're my father. They're not my father. You have all that sort of thing with children and teenagers, that are going on inside of them. So I think again, listening to them and asking them questions about how they're feeling is a part of the process, but also understanding their love language and letting them understand your love language can be very helpful.

Now, more recently, you know earlier you mentioned I had written a book called *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers*, which was written to parents. More recently, I wrote one to teenagers. It's called *A Teen's Guide to the Five Love Languages*, and some of the step-families in our church have been using that with the teenagers in a blended family, and saying, "I want you to read this and tell me what you think about it." So the teenager reads it and gets the concept and now you let them tell you what they think about it, and I don't know what they'll say. But then you say, "What do you think your love language is?" So now you're having a conversation with them about this whole topic of love, and when they begin to understand the love languages, they can look back and perhaps understand why they don't feel loved by their father, or feel loved by their mother, or maybe why their mother and father didn't get along well in their marriage. Now, let's make our family different. Let's make our family better. Let's make sure we love each other in our family. The love languages can be very helpful in a blended family.

Mark:

I love that. Thank you for being so authentic and genuine in that answer, and I think you're going to help a lot of people with that answer. You know, we're a community of families that have made the decision to raise their hand and said, I want to be more, do more, so that we can have more as a family. That's the families that are listening to this right now. That's the families that have stepped up to say, I'm ready for something significant to happen in my family. My last question is actually not really a question as much as it is, I'd like to just give you the opportunity to close us out here, knowing who you're speaking to, that these are families that have taken that hard first step to say, I'm ready for the chaos, the confusion, and the craziness to stop. I'm ready for my family to start thriving. What final advice would you give to a family that is stepping up, stepping out, maybe going against culture, society, their friendship circle. They're maybe going upstream in some regards. What advice would you give to these families that can be a fuel to keep them going in this direction?



Dr. Chapman:

First of all, I would commend them for consciously deciding, we can make this better. You know, so many families just drift. We get busy with all of our work and all of the things that are going on, and we just drift in our relationship. We've got a lot of activities, but we're not really connected to each other. When families drift, they always drift apart. You never drift together. You've got to put your oars in the water if you're gonna bring boats together you know. So the fact that you've decided that you're going to take some steps to make things better, is a huge step. I would just say, stick with it because a lot of times, in the middle of it, we get so busy we say, oh well you know, I don't know if I have time to keep doing this. No, follow it all the way down to the end.

We are all either growing in our relationships or we are regressing in our relationships. We never stand still. Things either get better or they get worse. I've always found, whether I'm working with a small group or I'm in a program where I'm getting exposed to ideas about marriage and family, I'm growing in my relationships. When I'm not, not reading any books, not listening to anything on the screen, not listening to any outside input, then we tend to drift. So you're on the right road. I would just challenge you, stick with it. Learn as much as you can. It can always be better. Even if you have a great family, it can always be better because we're in the process of growing.

Mark:

Dr. Chapman, I can't thank you enough for joining us this month on Thrive, the Ziglar Family community. It was so, so awesome talking to you about the five ways that family members can communicate with one another through their love language, and how important it is to learn each other's preferred love language. Thank you so much for your time, your talent, and the treasure that you have given to the Thrive community. Well thank you. Good to be with you, and keep up the good work. I appreciate what you all are doing.

Dr. Chapman:

Thank you.