How to Fill Your Child’s “Emotional Tank”

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A Colombian parent organization called “Red PaPaz” published an excellent overview of child development for ages 8 through 13 titled *Acompañando la Iniciación de la Adolescencia de Nuestros Hijos (Accompanying the Initiation of the Adolescence of Our Children).* The child is viewed as a multi-dimensional being: physical, intellectual, affective (emotional), social, and spiritual. The principle functions of parents are considered to be to “love, guide, and support” their children. Regarding the affective / emotional / love-related aspect of parenting, I would like to recommend to you a book that has become a best-selling “classic” on the subject: *How to* ***Really*** *Love Your Child* (2004 edition) by Ross Campbell, M.D. First published in 1977, over 1 million copies are in print. It has been translated into nearly 20 languages and has been updated. It is available for as little as US$4.67 (new), $.01 (used), or $0 (Kindle reader) at amazon.com.

Dr. Campbell uses a “gas tank” metaphor to explain and clarify children’s emotional needs.\* When their “emotional tanks” are low children are misbehaved, unruly, and irritable. This, of course, affects negatively their academic performance. When children’s “emotional tanks” are filled, they are content, peaceful, and easier to manage. The impact on academics is consequently positive. Dr. Campbell emphasizes that the “gasoline” of children’s tanks is love; a certain kind of love – unconditional love; the type of love that has no “if’s” attached; a kind of love that never directly or indirectly states: “I will love you if you do the following . . . ,” or “I will love you only if you behave as I want you to” and so on. Unconditional love requires us to feel and express love to our children sincerely and constantly, regardless of the circumstances. Dr. Campbell further explains that children feel truly and unconditionally loved in only three ways: (1) eye contact, (2) physical contact, and (3) focused attention. Alone, gifts, vacations to far-off places, and giving material “things” are not understood by children as being sufficient expressions of love.

“Focused attention” requires one-on-one, individual time with each child (in addition to family gatherings) during which the basic message is: “You are the princess (or prince) of my life. Yo u are so utterly cherished by me that I have carved out this special, regular time from my busy schedule to be with you to do whatever you want to do. My attention is undivided and uninterrupted. You are *that* important to me.”

“Eye contact” means looking unhesitatingly into the eyes of a child, in a natural way, while conversing with him or her; that is, not conversing only while driving, watching TV, or playing a game that requires one’s eyes to be looking elsewhere. Eye contact reinforces focused attention.

Physical contact needs to be appropriate, of course, according to the culture, the age, the sex, and the personality of the child. It’s not just hugging and kissing. Physical contact could be just a touch on the shoulder or arm, a gentle poke, a tousle of the hair, or even a fun-filled romp on a bed or living room floor.

I have chosen to write about this three-pronged approach to filling children’s emotional tanks with unconditional love because, over the years, I have noticed that when parents send their children to us educators at school with “filled tanks,” learning and teaching are so much more pleasant and easy. When children’s emotional tanks are low, both their job of acquiring new information and skills and behaving well and our job of transmitting knowledge and developing students’ skills become so much more troublesome. We educators are also able to fill children’s “emotional tanks” to some extent, but it is nothing compared to what moms and dads are capable of accomplishing. That’s what parents are “designed” for. You are natural “love givers” and “emotional tank fillers.” Therefore, my one request for parents is that you send us your child(ren) with their emotional tanks filled to the brim. If you do your job in this affective area, we will be better able to do our job of filling your child(ren)’s academic needs.

\*Stephen Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* uses a similar metaphor of “bank accounts,” with “deposits,” and “withdrawals” to explain the dynamics of all human relationships.