

# Do You Love Your Kids More Than You Love Your Partner?

They shower you with kisses, hand squeezes, and drawings. No wonder your children can feel easier to adore. Here are helpful ways to handle those common, hard-to-admit feelings.

by **DAPHNE DE MARNEFFE, PH.D.** / photographs by **PRISCILLA GRAGG**



**YOUR 4-YEAR-OLD** son wants to be your little helper, weeding the garden with you or measuring flour for a batch of cookies. He chats away while he tags along on a round of errands, and you feel like the best company in the world. Your little girl spontaneously hugs you, saying, “I love you, Mommy,” or “You are so pretty,” and at the end of a long day, you settle in to read a cozy bedtime story. You and your children are wonderful

in each other’s eyes, in such a simple and complete way.

As a therapist, I often hear parents talk about how much more satisfied they feel with their kids than with their partner. “It feels like a love affair,” said one new mom. In comparison, our spouses may lack some luster. Parents’ best energy goes toward making sure their children are thriving, and surviving as a couple often means being able to roll with a less-than-

ideal romantic relationship with each other.

However, couples can let their short-term blahs congeal into long-term grievances. They may start investing less in the marriage and more in the kids, until finally there may be little left. Or they become so consumed with their children that they back-burner real problems in the relationship that need to be addressed. What can you do to make sure that the

gap between love for your partner and love for your kids doesn’t continue to widen? Here are four suggestions.

## **Accept that adult closeness can take extra work.**

Adult partnerships are complex. Maybe your biggest need is downtime to watch your favorite show when your partner wants to talk, or your brain is so preoccupied by the kids or work that you

don't have much energy left for your spouse. In a good relationship, you accept your differences but also find time and energy to respond to each other's desires and needs. If you notice yourself avoiding or dismissing your spouse, make a conscious effort to turn toward them. In my view, that effort always begins with being curious about your partner and what they are going through. Asking a genuinely interested question will help you get in better sync. Also, try to be open to the same tender feelings with your partner that are so easy to access with your kid. Notice when an irritable response to your spouse pops up ("Why does he always leave the light on in the living room before bed?") and reframe it empathetically ("I know how tired he is by this time of the day"). Partners have told me that they're jealous of the sweet talk their children so easily receive from the other parent ("She used to talk to me like that"), so try being more of an equal-opportunity sweet-talker.

### Keep touching.

Kids are so soft and openly loving, but touching your partner can be tricky. If you hug them, will they make you feel guilty later if you don't want to have sex? Of course, when you're sharing cuddles with your kids all day, you may genuinely need less touching from your spouse, but you can still give each other some of what you get from your children. Friendly, low-stakes touching, such as laying a hand on their shoulder or holding their hand, is its own reward, so try to be generous with it. We all want to feel nurtured and safe in a comforting relationship. In



that way, we're all kids inside and want to be cherished unconditionally. However, if you've truly lost the desire to touch your spouse, think about why. You might discover that emotional hurt or anger is getting in the way. If talking on your own doesn't make it better, get professional help.

### Don't put off dealing with unhappiness.

Sometimes relationships are less satisfying than we wish they were, and the best approach is to ride it out. But if you feel unloving or blah toward your spouse in an

ongoing way, it won't help to put your relationship on hold while your kids are young and more demanding. In my practice I see people who've adopted that strategy, only to feel there's nothing there once their kids get older and leave home. Instead, take steps to understand how and whether your relationship can be improved. You may never feel that your love for your spouse goes as deep as your love for your children, but that doesn't have to be a big problem if things with your spouse are satisfying enough and you've worked on making things as good as they can be.

### Remember that loving your partner is a way of loving your kids.

"When I'm with my son, I relax and enjoy the simple pleasures—I can be myself!" exclaimed my client Paul in the midst of recounting the prior week's fight with his

wife. He felt that in his wife's eyes, he was always doing something wrong, and he knew he was prone to getting annoyed too. At the same time, Paul wanted to feel closer to his wife precisely because he loved his son so much. Indeed, loving your kids is a good motivator to have the best relationship you can with their other parent.

Raising a child is one of life's great adventures, and you can bond over the delight of seeing your kids grow and change. Your kids are also watching you and absorbing a lot about adult relationships from how you relate as a team. Parenting isn't only about the early stages, when little ones are cute and huggable. It's about helping kids develop emotional skills, navigate independence, and ultimately launch their own lives. That means teaching them by example how to manage conflict, treat others with respect, and express warmth and understanding. ✖



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