



Keeping the Gas Tank Full

Have you ever run out of gas or been so close to empty that you couldn't do anything else but go straight to the gas station to fill up? It's very frustrating, isn't it? You can't go anywhere and accomplish what you intended and nothing else happens until you get filled up. So it is with our teens. When their "gas tanks" are running on empty there's a good chance they will not perform up to expectations and eventually they will stop having fun in life. Nothing else gets accomplished in their day until they can get filled up again. Therefore, we must make sure their emotional tank has plenty of gas so they can make it down the road of life. In the past, we have talked about how teens need to feel loved and not just know they are loved. They feel loved when 5 crucial elements are in their lives, physical touch, quality time, gifts, words of affirmation, and acts of service. Dr. Gary Chapman has a great book out called, "The Five Love Languages of Teenagers". I strongly recommend you get your hands on a copy so you can have a fuller understanding of these principles.

We want to discuss three important points in keeping the gas tank full. First, we want to discuss what type of fuel is needed in the tank. Second, how do we recognize when the tank is almost empty and the danger of an empty tank? Last, we want to talk about how to put the fuel in the tank and how often.

So what type of fuel do we need to put in the tank? This specially formulated blend of gas is called "**unconditional love.**" Without this type of fuel, it's very difficult for a person to feel good about themselves. Without unconditional love, parenting can be very confusing and frustrating. So what is unconditional love? Simply put, unconditional love means you love your teen no matter what.

- No matter what your teen looks like and dresses like
- No matter how he or she acts
- No matter what you see as a liability or asset

It's important to note that unconditional love doesn't mean you have to like their behavior but it does mean that you love them even when you detest their behavior. Most parents would say they love their teens unconditionally. However, when looked at through clear lenses they might discover that they indeed put conditions on the teen's response to their love.

There are generally three types of love in the Bible. The first is "eros" which means a sensual or sexual love. It's the type of love a husband and wife would share in their relationship which completes them physically. The second type of love is 'philia' or "phileo" which means brotherly love. This is the type of love we have for relatives and friends. The third type of love is known as "agape" which is the most popular that we have heard. It means a selfless love or what we refer to as unconditional love. It's the highest level of love in the Bible.

One of the greatest verses in the Bible about unconditional love is found in I Corinthians 13:4-7.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

We could spend chapters on this verse. The above verse states what unconditional love is in such a clear way. No one can improve on what it says. However, I'd like for you to look at the last sentence. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. When it comes to making sure we put the right type of fuel in our teen's emotional tanks we need to ask ourselves a few tough questions.

1. How secure does our teen feel? Do they feel protected or smothered? Protected from what, whom, why, and where?
2. How much trust is developed in our relationship with our teen? Do they feel we trust them? If not why? When can they be trusted again? How will we help them trust again?
3. Does our teen have hope? What do they place their hope in?
4. How do we teach our teen to persevere without being uncaring? Do they know we will be there for them in the long haul?

Dr. Ross Campbell who wrote "How to Really Love Your Children", stated after raising his teens he had come to the following conclusions.

- Teenagers are still children in many ways
- Teenagers will usually act like teenagers and not adults
- Much of teenager behavior is unpleasant
- If you love your teen only when they please you chances are your teen will not "feel" loved
- However, if you love your teen unconditionally they will feel good about themselves and be comfortable with themselves.

Do you know what the most important question a teen has on their mind? The teen will always ask, "DO YOU LOVE ME?" They will usually ask that question by their behavior and not their words. Since they are asking this question behaviorally they are going to expect the answer in the same way. Most parents want to be able to answer the question properly with a resounding yes but most don't know-how. So they just use words. However, words often will not be enough for a teen. Words don't always reach a teen's feelings. So how do you love them behaviorally? We've already answered it. We love them behaviorally by loving them unconditionally. The challenge for a parent is to learn to love as a teen needs to be loved. Most teens like children are behaviorally oriented while most adults are verbally oriented. An example would be when the husband/father is away on a business trip. If he called his wife and said, "Honey, I just wanted to call and let you know I love you." More than likely she'd be on cloud nine and loved hearing those words. Now put the teenage boy on the phone and say, "Son, I just called to let you know I love you." More than likely the teen would say, "That's great dad but why did you really call?" See the difference between being loved behaviorally and verbally? **Though the words are important to your teen he is more affected by what you do than what you say.**

So how do you know when their emotional tank is getting empty?

- **When their emotional tanks are full of the right fuel (unconditional love) it will affect their behavior. You will notice they seem to be more obedient, respectful, happy, and content**
- **When their emotional tanks are running low and have the wrong fuel (conditional love) it will affect their behavior. You will notice they seem to be more disobedient, disrespectful, angry, and troubled.**

Dr. Ross Campbell says to think of your teen like a reflector sometimes. They reflect the type of love they receive. If it's conditional love where praise, warmth, and affection are withheld because conditions were not met, thus the teen will also withhold such toward the parents. For example, if the teen "feels" that the parent only accepts them if they make good grades and the parent withholds acceptance, then they, in turn, will not produce good grades because they want the parent to feel the same way they feel when unconditional love is withheld. I'm not saying

that parents shouldn't have standards for school but it should never get in the way of how a teen feels they are accepted by the parent. If you want to teach them about self-discipline it should never be at the expense of their character. Some parents ground their teens if they make a "C" because they automatically associate the "C" with rebellion toward them as parents. Perhaps the teen is reflecting the way they think the parent wants to be loved (conditionally), and it's their way of withholding love.

So how do we put the fuel in their tank and how often?

Remember this important point. Our teenagers are like two-year-olds. They both want and need to develop independence. However, when they start to feel insecure in their feelings of independence they will run back to the parent for their emotional tank to be refilled. Think about how a two-year-old will be shy when they first walk into a room with a bunch of people they don't know. They will cling to the parent until they feel it's safe and they will only walk away from the parent when they are comfortable in their environment. Once that happens the parent can put them down on the floor and watch the two-year-old start to explore. Everything is going great until something unfamiliar happens in their environment and as soon as that happens you can see the two-year-old run back to the legs of the parent for additional refilling of their emotional tanks.

So too is the emotional tank of the teen. They strive for independence but deep down inside still want and need their parents to refill their tank when it gets empty. If the parent does not allow that to happen then the teen will go to peers to make sure their tank stays full. When a teen gets all their emotional love from peers then it usually will turn into a dangerous situation within the home.

Why do teens prefer to have their tanks filled by peers rather than parents?

It can be found in one word. OVERREACTION! Too many times, especially if a teen is loved conditionally in certain areas of their lives, the parent overreacts to a behavioral issue. Remember, teens feel love behaviorally and not just through words. If a parent responds to a negative situation in intense anger then the teen will not run to the parent when their love tank is empty. The love tank usually gets empty when something negative is going on in their life. When something negative is going on in their life the parent usually overreacts emotionally. The cycle repeats itself until the teen finally stops running to the parent for emotional support. Then the parent usually can be heard saying, "We just don't talk anymore". It is very critical that the parent keep their emotions in check so lines of communication can stay open. If not, the teen will get that emotional support from other teens and then peer pressure will require the teen to respond usually in inappropriate ways. **I repeat, when our teens test us with inappropriate behavior to be independent, it is vital that we not overreact emotionally.** You don't condone the behavior, but you do respond respectfully without yelling, name-calling, or attacking the child verbally. Look at it this way, if you saw another adult you knew lose self-control and start yelling in public at the person they are having a conversation with, you would probably lose a little respect for that person at that moment. Your teenager feels the same way.

The following ways are some great ways to put emotional fuel of unconditional love in their tanks when they show signs of being low. (Rebellion, anger, depression, disrespect, disobedient, etc...)

- **Understand that letting your anger enter into your conversation will ALWAYS hurt your communication with your teen.**
 - "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control." Prov. 29:11
 - "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger". Prov. 15:1
 - "A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel." Prov. 15:18
 - "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" Eph. 4:29

Notice 4 critical things from the verses above to improve communication with your teen and keep the tank full.

- 1) Your teen will think you are a fool when you let your anger get out of control.
- 2) The more anger you display the more chance your teen will reflect it right back to you. Keep your cool by removing yourself from the situation. If you need to for a few minutes, pray for a calm spirit.
- 3) Patience will help calm the argument and anger can't be part of the equation
- 4) Even in a disagreeable situation, your teen needs to be built up. Their emotional tank gets refilled when they feel like you want the experience to benefit them.

➤ **Understand that your teen needs to not only feel forgiven but they know how to forgive as well.**

- "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Eph. 4:32
- "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Ps. 103:12
- "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him..." Mark 11:25

One of the greatest emotional feelings a person needs, especially a teen, is the need to feel forgiven. The desire to not feel a heavy burden placed on their backs or to have a parent who frequently holds a failure over their heads. Too many teens stop getting their tanks filled by their parents because they do not feel forgiven for a past transgression they did. It may have hurt you as a parent but no grudge is worth holding on to when you can lose your teen forever. Learn to forgive in Christ and don't hold onto past failures of your teen. Let them know you release them of this and set them free just as God in Christ has done for you.

➤ **Understand that laughter must be a part of each day with your teen and that it will help fill their emotional tank quickly.**

- *A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. Prov. 17:22*
- *A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart, the spirit is crushed. Prov. 15:13*
- *A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; Ecc. 3:4*
- *You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. Ps. 4:7*
- *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Phil. 4:4*
- *Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. Ps. 43:4*

5 important things laughter does when filling the tank.

- 1) It helps reduce the chances of wounding your teen and helps limit depression
- 2) If timed right, laughter can meet a need just at the right time.
- 3) Laughter comes from the Lord
- 4) We need to learn to laugh with our teens even when things are not going the greatest. Find a way to see the humor in some difficult situations.
- 5) Laughter is drawn from a relationship with God. Learn to worship and learn to sing praises and you'll learn to laugh.

So there you have it. Making sure your teen's emotional gas tank is full is critical to their success. Watching for signs of it being low is just as important. Remember your teen responds to love behaviorally and not just verbally. Find ways to communicate this to them and don't let your behavior ruin the opportunity to fill their tank. If you do, you'll find them running to someone else to get it filled. After all, they must continue to journey down the road of life so make sure they have the right fuel. Don't let someone else put bad fuel in their tank. Remember, it's your car so take responsibility for making sure it's properly filled.