



by Karen Stephens

Creative Parenting: Simple Ways to Show Kids You Care

I was busy in the office; my desk covered with paper. I was trying to unbury, sort, file, and recycle, all at once. In the midst of this flurry — no, it was more like a blizzard — in walked two four-year-old boys.

Typically I drop whatever I'm doing when I get short visitors with sparkling eyes. But today, even two affable boys couldn't distract me. (Yes, I was that behind!)

Alex asked, "Karen, ya want to draw with markers with us?" Me: "I'd love to, but I can't today, I'm really busy. (Enter Guilt.)" "You two can draw without me, though."

The boys took this well, but the office was so cluttered Alex had to ask, "Okay, but where are your markers?" Abent-mindedly I pointed to a shelf (brimming with papers) and off-handedly said, "Under there, dearest."

"Dearest?" Alex asked with quizzical eye brows and an adorable crinkled up nose. "What does dearest mean?" Still shuffling papers, I said it meant someone who was close to my heart, someone I liked a lot.

Alex shot me a matter-of-fact, satisfied look and gave me a knowing, "Ooooooh." He then turned directly to his buddy and said, "Come on, dearest. She's too busy today. Let's go play with blocks instead."

So in a spontaneous way, my visitors learned a new word and quickly used it in perfect context. Kids really are brilliant, aren't they? Just like most of life's lessons are taught, this language lesson was subtle and unintentional. (My only true goal for the morning was to get through triplicates!) Unwittingly, I showed kids how to show affection by using a verbal endearment. It's simple. We adults do it all the time.

Each family has preferred endearments. You know, like calling kids pumpkin pie, sweet pea, or little dumpling. (The French lovingly refer to children as "little cauliflowers." Believe me, it sounds much prettier in French.)

Endearments are just one way to show children how much we care for them. There are many other ways. I've listed "caring ways" I've picked up from friends and parents. All promote a strong parent-child bond. Coupled with consistent, responsible parenting, these small deeds go far in building children's self esteem (and your own).

Write a simple poem or song and name it after your child. You're not a poet? Simply use the letters in your child's name to create a love note. Example: Alan. A is for Awesome. L is for Lucky. A is for Adorable. N is for neatest kid around! Violá, a poem. (I didn't say it had to be a prize winner! It's supposed to score high marks with your child; other judges' opinions don't matter in this poetry contest.)

- Plant a tree or shrub to commemorate each child's birthday.
- Mat and/or frame a piece of your child's artwork yearly. Label and date it for posterity.
- Carry a mini-photo album of your kids in your purse or briefcase. Let the kids see you show it to others with pride. And don't forget to brag about them within earshot!
- Videotape children's play, even when it's not a special occasion.
- Place a small bouquet of fresh flowers on your children's nightstand while they are asleep so it's the first thing they see in the morning.

“ Make a
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- Plant a fragrant viburnum shrub or lilac bush outside your kids' bedroom window so they can enjoy the scents of spring.
- Give your kids a back rub, shoulder rub, or back scratch "just because."
- Before kids play in chilly or windy weather, rub lotion on their cheeks.
- Leave kids messages on your answering machine. Make them as mushy as you dare!
- Hide "just because gifts" in unexpected places for children to find. Simple gifts, like a sheet of stickers hidden under a breakfast plate, can brighten a morning.
- Order or make personalized items with your kids' names. Suggestions: book nameplates, address labels, note pads, stationery, magnets, photo frames, journal logs, or bedroom door signs.
- Make a Valentine for your child, especially when it isn't Valentines Day!
- Have meals by candlelight often.
- Find a hobby you can share with the kids, like collecting bird feathers, baseball cards, stamps, or even bookmarks.
- Carry an "emergency" kit in your purse or briefcase to help children cope with boring waits. Suggestions: paperback books, jacks, yoyo, markers with a pad of paper.
- Before taking a trip, tape record yourself reading kids' favorite books or singing lullabies. The tape can continue a bedtime ritual even when you're out of town!
- When traveling without the kids, send each a post card written just for them.
- Leave love notes in the kids' lunch boxes or backpacks.

If you play an instrument, or sing well, serenade your child's day care center during lunch or nap time.

- Dress up for Halloween with your child. (A 70-something friend recalls trick-or-treating with her kids dressed as Wee Willy Winky. What a wild, creative mom!)
- Monthly, add photos to an album for each child (not just the first born!).
- Plant flowers in honor of your child. Plant "sweet William" for your Bill, "lupines" for your Lovely Lucy, or "Virginia bluebells" for your blue-eyed Ginny.
- Write down phone messages on heart-shaped doilies. Moms can "sign them" with a lipstick kiss! (Very secure dads can do the same. Wink. Wink.)
- Invite your children to visit at your workplace. Place their photos conspicuously!
- Every once in a while, but not too often, surprise your child by doing their chore.
- Take 12 photos of the kids to a copy shop so they can be combined into a calendar.
- Hide a Hershey's Kiss or Hug under your child's upturned juice cup. Don't forget to give them the real thing many times a day!
- Cut treats into heart shapes using cookie cutters. Try heartshaped Jell-O®, sandwiches, cakes, muffins, or even pancakes.
- Surprise your child with breakfast in bed! (Include a comic book, not a newspaper.)
- When picking up your child from day care or school, provide a baggie of peanuts. Include a note that says, "I'm absolutely nutty over you!"

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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