

COMMITMENT

INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS

“I had no idea she would be there. My apologies for her absence had been well-rehearsed.

When my high school home economics teacher announced that we would be having a formal mother-daughter tea, I felt certain I would not be serving my mother at this special event.

So I will never forget walking into the gaily decorated gym--and there she was! As I looked at her, sitting calmly and smiling, I imagined all the arrangements this remarkable woman must have had to make to be able to be with me for that one hour.

Who was looking after Granny? She was bedridden following a stroke, and Mom had to do everything for her. My three little sisters would be home from school before Mom got there. Who would greet them and look at their papers?

How did she get here? We didn't own a car, and she couldn't afford a taxi. It was a long walk to get the bus, plus at least five more blocks to the school. And the pretty dress she was wearing, red with tiny white flowers, was just right for the tea. It brought out the silver beginning to show in her dark hair. There was no money for extra clothes, and I knew she had gone into debt again at our coal company store to have it.

I was so proud! I served her tea with a happy, thankful heart, and introduced her boldly to the group when our turn came. I sat with my mother that day, just like the rest of the class, and that was very important to me. The look of love in her eyes told me she understood.

I have never forgotten. One of the promises I made to myself and to my children, as young mothers make promises, was that I would always be there for them. That promise is difficult to keep in today's busy world. But I have an example before me that puts any lame excuses to rest. I just recall again when Mother came to tea.”

Margie H. Coburn

During our lifetime we make many commitments. We commit to being educated and to attend school. We commit our loyalty to friends. We commit to bank loan officers, employers and politicians. However, of all the commitments we make in life, commitment to our family is the most important.

What does being committed to our family mean? I believe it means that we give our hearts and our time to our family, no matter what the consequences may be. We commit to do whatever is necessary to ensure family happiness. There are countless ways to show our commitment to our family. I would like to suggest three things we can do to demonstrate this virtue in our lives.

1. Let family members know without a doubt that we love them. During the

years I was a school teacher I taught over 3,000 students. Countless times children would struggle to achieve, fully believing that their parent's love for them was conditional upon their success in school. At first I thought the students were mistaken. Surely parents wouldn't withdraw their love if their child, in spite of his best efforts, did poorly in the classroom. Sadly, too often I was the one mistaken. There were many parents who saw their child's performance at school as a reflection on them and treated the child unkindly when he didn't meet their expectations. These parents gave love only when grades were high, contests were won, and rules were obeyed. That is conditional love.

The issue of conditional love applies to children as well. It is likely that children will be more cheerful, obedient and loving at home when they get things they want and life is "going their way." However, when parents ask those same children to do chores, or give their time to the family when they'd rather be doing something else, how do they respond?

All of us can examine our actions to decide if we show conditional or unconditional love to family members. Unconditional love means that we love the members of our family no matter how they act. We may believe strongly that their actions are wrong, and as parents we should discipline our children for unacceptable behavior. However, unconditional love means that even when we disagree with a person's actions, we still love him. We show that love through our kind (sometimes necessarily firm) tone of voice, and our kind words and actions, even when we are in disagreement.

Family members need to show one another that the basis of their relationship is unconditional love, no strings attached, no matter what. We need to look in our children's, our parent's, our brother's and sister's eyes and say, "I love you." Often. Family members need to know that love for them does not depend on whether they win the game, drive a fancy car, earn a promotion at work, or anything else. We need to make it very clear to one another that there is nothing we must do to earn love. Nor is there anything we can ever do that will destroy our love for one another. This does not mean that we aren't grieved when unwise decisions are made. We still need to constantly strive to be the best we can possibly be. But it does mean that we will love one another no matter what happens.

2. Let our family know that we will be there for them. This powerful statement tells family members they are of such immense value that someone is willing to sacrifice for them--to give their very life for them if necessary. Thankfully, we aren't usually called upon to make huge sacrifices for one another. But are day-to-day small sacrifices sometimes difficult? Yes. The following exercise can become part of a discussion on commitment to the family, and sacrifices we each make: Ask your children to talk to Dad about how he feels sometimes at work when he is required to do things that take him to his very limit. Ask Mom what she felt like during her ninth month of pregnancy. Ask children how they feel when they've returned home after a long day at school or work and parents want them to cheerfully do chores instead of relaxing. We all make

sacrifices. That's part of what being in a family is all about. We give to one another because we love each other and we believe in our long-term goals of growth, peace and happiness.

Years ago I heard some good advice for parents: "Be there at the crossroads of your children's lives." This means that as often as possible we need to be there when our children come home from school. We need to be there when our children hit their first home run, graduate from school, and when our teenagers need to talk (usually late at night). Time is precious. Time is what lives are made of. We need to be so committed to our children that we are willing to give them our time. Children don't thrive on "leftover time" as well as on "prime time." Even when it is inconvenient, we should be there for our children whenever possible. I'm not saying that we should give to our children at the expense of our own identities. There can be a balance, and we usually know when we are giving too little or too much.

This concept needs to be extended to children also. Children need to understand that families are like teams--they work together to reach the same goals. Children have very important positions on the team and are needed to make it work well. Parents, do you tell your children how important they are to your family's success? Do your children know that you need them to support, appreciate and love you just as much as they need you? Share with your children the idea that as they become adults (and you get old) you may need them just like they needed you as babies. It's called the circle of life.

Love is communicated in many ways. One of the most powerful ways we can show our love is to be there for our family when they need us.

3. Always be honest. Parents and children alike should have an understanding that they will never, ever purposely say something that is not true. When you practice the principle of honesty in your home, then confidence, respect, and trust exist. This works for both parents and children.

Parents, our children will notice any inconsistencies between what we say and the way we live. Our inconsistencies will undermine our credibility. They will also destroy our opportunity to discipline our children, especially in their teenage years, when they begin to question our authority. If we establish a high level of consistency in our words and actions, our children will soon discover that they can count on us to follow through with what we have said, whether that results in something positive or negative. For example, when we tell our child, "If you come home late again, I am going to take away your driving privileges," we must do what we said, even if it is difficult or inconvenient. On the other hand, when we tell our children, "If you clean up your room, I will take you swimming this afternoon," we must keep our promise. Otherwise, our children will quickly realize that our words don't have any real meaning. A broken promise is a lie to a child. Consistent truth-telling on the parents' part sets the ground rules for honesty on the children's part.

As parents we should teach our children that there needs to be consistency in their words and actions. When parents know without a doubt that children are honest, we can trust them and allow them more freedom. When parents know that children will keep their promises, we are more willing to make promises with them. Usually parents trust their children until children lie. Then trust is diminished and difficult to restore. The fact is that dishonesty damages relationships. Once relationships are broken they can only be repaired by repeated, healing acts of honesty. A good way to show commitment to family is by being honest, always.

I have six additional thoughts on commitment. When we are committed to family:

1. We understand that commitment includes fidelity between spouses. This generates a sense of trust and security.
2. We have a unity among family members that puts the family first, but at the same time we help each individual progress and actively promote the well-being of each family member.
1. We understand that no person and no family is perfect. We tolerate one another's shortcomings and practice patience.
4. We recognize that abuse and/or abandonment are not options.
2. We seek solutions when problems arise and make resolutions to improve.
3. We adapt to inevitable family changes.

Perhaps the greatest value of commitment is that it serves as an expression of love. Love is a concept that the experts have trouble defining. But strong families know what love means. It means commitment. It means being there through thick and thin, and it means not giving up when the going gets tough. Commitment is not an easy skill to learn. It requires considerable effort, much practice, and frequent sacrifice. Nonetheless, it is worth it. Commitment to family makes all the difference, and guarantees rich rewards.