Beyond "Lots of Hugs and Kisses": Expressions of Parental Love from Parents and their Young

Children in Two-Parent, Financially Stable Families

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Abstract

Given that parental love is essential for children's optimal development, the current study
gathered examples of how parental love was demonstrated within parent-child relationships.
Fifty-eight two-parent, financially stable families consisting of a mother, father, and young child
(3-7 years old) from the Midwest were interviewed regarding how they demonstrated or
perceived parental love. Results from an inductive thematic analysis revealed considerable
variability in how parental love was demonstrated, with five themes emerging that overlapped
between parents and their children: Playing or Doing Activities Together, Demonstrating
Affection, Creating Structure, Helping or Supporting, and Giving Gifts or Treats. Some gendered
patterns among these themes were found with mothers emphasizing physical and verbal affection
and fathers highlighting their more prominent role as playmates. The lay examples provided by
parents and children in this exploratory study extend previous conceptualizations of parental love
and underscore the importance of parents being attuned and responsive to the specific needs of
their children.

Keywords: love, parent-child relationships, parenting, qualitative research

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The experience of feeling loved is essential for children's healthy development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Sroufe, 2005). Children's first experiences of feeling loved typically occur within a parent-child relationship (Bowlby, 1969, 1982), and those with more loving parents benefit in a number of ways – from greater peer competence in childhood to fewer psychological adjustment problems later in life (e.g., depression, substance abuse; Groh,et al., 2014; Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2005). In light of the numerous benefits of parental love, it is critical to understand how parents express this love and how children perceive it early in life.

A current limitation to understanding parental love is that most relevant work to date has assumed how parents demonstrate love using theories and operationalizations without inquiring of parents or children how love is commonly experienced within their relationships. This approach is critical, as work with adults on different types of love (e.g., romantic love, compassionate love) has revealed meaningful differences between lay persons' and researchers' definitions of love (Fehr & Russell, 1991; Fehr & Sprecher, 2009; Wade, Auer, & Roth, 2009). Utilizing a qualitative approach for this endeavor is particularly valuable as it allows people to share insights about their specific experiences of love, which adds to an understanding of the research on love and the broad definitions generated by researchers (Ganong & Coleman, 2014). Therefore, the current study explores acts of parental love from the perspective of parents and their young children using inductive thematic analysis of interviews with mothers, fathers, and their young children in two-parent, financially stable families.

What is Parental Love and How is it Expressed?

Though parental love has been listed as the best example of love by lay individuals, there has been little empirical research examining parental love as a specific construct (Fehr & Russell, 1991). Researchers instead use a variety of related constructs such as warmth, acceptance, sensitivity, care, affection, and support to capture parental love, though the relationship between parental love and these associated concepts remains unexplored to date. These various constructs may be unique components of an overarching concept of parental love or synonyms describing how parental love is conceptualized. For example, a description of warmth as "the expression of positive affect, affection, and admiration toward the child [and involving] manifestations of fondness and enjoyment of the child carried out both spontaneously

and in response to children's initiations" (Davidov & Grusec, 2006, p. 44) could be applied to other concepts often treated as synonymous with parental love, such as care. However, one differentiating characteristic of these various concepts is the tendency to emphasize the domains of emotion, cognition, and behavior to differing degrees. Furthermore, most of these related concepts appear to describe behaviors that parents enact aimed at helping their children feel love and affection, which is consistent with Buss' (1988) statement that "love is not simply a state; love acts" (p. 100).

These behavioral demonstrations of parental love are critical to understand, as certain parental behaviors are necessary to foster a healthy bond between parent and child over time. According to attachment theory, this affectional bond develops as parents enact sensitive and responsive behaviors that foster the child's sense of security and safety (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). In other words, to the extent that parents are "attuned" to their children's emotional and physical needs, children will develop a secure attachment with them (Schore, & Schore, 2008). From this perspective, acts of parental love may be demonstrated toward young children in at least three broad ways. First, parental love is demonstrated through providing comfort in response to a child's distress (Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Leerkes, Blankson, & O'Brien, 2009). Second, parental love can take the form of positive interactions such as expressing positive affect, pleasure, and appreciation (Davidov & Grusec, 2006). Finally, providing structure (e.g., expecting socially appropriate behavior, consistent discipline) is also key, as control, when coupled with care and warmth, is critical for attachment security (Karavasilis, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 2003; Neal & Frick-Horbury, 2001). It is through repeated demonstrations of such loving behaviors as these that create the relational processes that develop into the essential secure attachment bond between parent and child.

However, it is unknown whether parents would cite these or other behaviors as ways that they show love for their children or if young children would perceive such behaviors as acts of parental love. Despite Buss (1988) calling for research to gather acts of parental love, this has yet to be done, even in a follow-up to his original study (Wade et al., 2009). As a result, researchers have largely assumed which acts represent parental love based on theory. Furthermore, there may be a discrepancy between what theory purports and the natural and common experience of love between parents and their young children (Fehr, Harasymchuk, & Specher, 2014), given that laypersons' views are often different than expert or theoretical perspectives, especially when

it comes to more subjective experiences such as love. For example, Sabey, Rauer, and Haselschwerdt (2016) found that older married couples' examples of compassionate love were unexpectedly shaped by their developmental stage (i.e., older adulthood), as many examples were about caring for each other's physical health. Thus, gathering reports from parents and children about how they express and perceive love in their relationships would be invaluable to compare to and potentially substantiate current theories of parental love.

Whose Love?: Focusing on Who is Expressing Parental Love and Who is Receiving It

Acts of parental love may also vary in meaningful ways according to the gender of the parent expressing love. Such an examination is warranted as mothers and fathers in mother-father pairs have been found to not only behave differently toward their children, but to also play unique, yet complementary, roles in fostering children's attachment security (George, Cummings, & Davies, 2010; Newland & Coyl, 2010; Palkovitz, Trask, & Adamsons, 2014). These socialized gender roles most commonly take the form of mothers acting as nurturers to provide warmth and security and fathers acting as playmates to promote exploration (Palm, 2014; Paquette, 2004). On the other hand, some parenting behaviors are similar across mothers and fathers, such as sensitivity (Fagan, Day, Lamb, & Cabrera, 2014). Thus, beginning to explore if and how married mothers and fathers express love differently with their children may reveal new avenues for studying parent-child relationships in two-parent, financially stable families. It is particularly important to uncover the voices of fathers for the expression of parental love because the majority of research on parenting and attachment relationships have been based on studies of mothers (Palm, 2014), and fathers may express their love differently with their children.

Furthermore, it is also important to examine children's perceptions of parental love (i.e., parents accurately attending to children's internal states; Schore, & Schore, 2008). Children's reports of parental love may be different than their parents' and such loving experiences have been found to be more beneficial if they are perceived as such by the recipient (Rohner et al., 2005; Sessa, Avenevoli, Steinberg, & Morris, 2001). For example, in work with newlywed couples, Reis, Maniaci, and Rogge (2014) found that an act of compassionate love generated the most relational benefits when perceived as such by both the recipient and the provider. It may be key then that a child perceives an act of love in the ways the parent intended. Along this vein, D'Cruz and Stagnitti (2010) collected stories from five children about what it was like for a child

to be loved by a parent. The stories revealed four themes highlighting physical affection (e.g., kisses and hugs), shared special times with special activities (e.g., reading a story together), special relationships (e.g., mother-child relationship), and nurturance (e.g., providing physical safety and warmth). Similarly, interviews with 200 children highlighted the themes of physical affection and being helped as common ways that young children felt loved by their mothers (Klein, 1989). These studies provide a brief glimpse into the experience of parental love from the child's perspective; however, we need further information from children's perspectives to compare generally with how parents report demonstrating love to their children. In addition, more recent studies are needed as cultural shifts in parenting over time may affect how parental love is currently expressed in contemporary society.

The expression and perception of parental love may also differ according to children's gender and age. Parents often treat their sons and daughters differently and parenting behaviors typically change according to children's age (Leaper, Anderson, & Sanders, 1998; Raley & Bianchi, 2006; Shelton, Frick, & Wootton, 1996). Traditional gender roles would suggest that girls may be shown love and affection in more feminine ways (e.g., verbal expressions of love) and boys in more masculine ways (e.g., physical play) and some observational research has confirmed this for fathers (Mascaro, Rentscher, Hackett, Mehl, & Rilling, 2017; McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003; Witt, 1997). Acts of parental love may also change as children get older and positive parenting behaviors decrease (Shelton et al., 1996). Gathering reports from mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters on how parental love is expressed will provide insight into the extent to which parental love depends on who is providing it and who is receiving it.

Current Study

The current study is the first to examine reports from mothers, fathers, and their young children on how love and affection are expressed within the parent-child relationship. We addressed the following set of questions: (1) How does this sample of parents typically demonstrate love and affection to their children?; (2) How do children perceive love from their parents?; (3) Are there gender differences for parents or children, and differences for children of different ages in how parental love is demonstrated or perceived?; and (4) Are children's perceptions of love generally congruent with how their parents report demonstrating love to them? To answer these questions, we used inductive thematic analysis, a common method of identifying and reporting themes across and within interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to

analyze qualitative interviews of 58 married couples (mothers and fathers) and their young children. To note, these families represented a sample of two-parent, mother-father couples who identified as being happily married, well-educated, and financially stable. Our findings should be considered within those parameters. Consistent with a social constructionist perspective (Daly, 2007), our analytic approach prioritized the participants' perceptions of how love and affection are commonly demonstrated and perceived, as opposed to interjecting the researcher's own assumptions regarding how love should be demonstrated (Zvonkovic, Sharp, & Radina, 2012).

Method

Participants

Fifty-eight married, mother-father pairs and their children participated in the Marriage and Child Development Study. Families from a Midwestern city were recruited from birth records, newspaper advertisements, and bulletins at local churches, daycares, and preschools. To be eligible, couples had to identify as happily married and both spouses had to provide consent for participation. Families also had to have a 2-year-old child with an older sibling in preschool or early-elementary school, though the younger child did not complete the love interview and thus was not included in the current analyses. Confirming that the couples were happily married, all 58 couples reported being "happy" to "perfectly happy" on the first item of the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959). To note, although participation was open to same-sex couples, none enrolled.

Husbands and wives were approximately 37 (SD = 4.6) and 35 years old (SD = 4.5) respectively, predominately European American (n = 54 and 56, respectively), and all had at least some college education. Most of the families were middle or upper-middle class and 57% of the households were dual-earner. Husbands' modal income was between $70,000 and $80,000 and wives' modal income was $10,000 or less. Wives who were currently employed had a modal income between $10,000 and $20,000 and between $40,000 and $50,000. Parents were married for an average of 8.7 years (SD = 3.4), and all were the biological parents of the children. The older sibling (target child) in each family (M_{age} = 57.5 months; SD = 12 months; range = 38 to 86 months) was interviewed for this study (25 males and 33 females).

Procedure

Couples and their children participated in two separate laboratory visits. The first visit only included the couple and focused on marital interaction tasks and individual spousal

interviews. The second visit included the entire family and focused on family interaction tasks and interviews with the older sibling. Spouses also completed separate take-home questionnaires assessing marital and family relationships. Husbands and wives were each compensated $50 and both children received a small toy at the conclusion of the second visit.

Husbands and wives were interviewed separately by an experimenter and were asked "What types of things do you do with your children that show them you feel affectionate or loving towards them?" The children were also interviewed separately and were asked, "What types of things does your mommy do that lets you know she loves you? What other things? And can you think of anything else she does?" This set of questions was repeated about "daddy." The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim and checked.

Data Analysis Plan

We used an inductive thematic analysis approach to analyze our data, modifying Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis to suit our research questions and data. In phase one, all of the acts of parental love were extracted from the transcripts as shared by the fathers, mothers, and children and placed in a Microsoft Excel file. The first and third authors read through the expressions of love to become familiar with the data. Both authors had been trained in qualitative data analysis and had specific coding experience in thematic analysis. In phase two, guided by Buss' (1988) work on love acts, both coders independently transformed the expressions of love into simple, one sentence actions and discussed any discrepancies (e.g., "says I love you," "makes meals"). Upon comparison of this independent coding, there were few meaningful discrepancies given the simplicity of the interviews and subsequent codes, and thus, the coders worked in unison to create the final description for each expression of parental love.

In phase three, we sorted and grouped the expressions of parental love into 22 preliminary themes based on commonalities and differences. For example, the acts of "says I love you" and "expresses gratitude" became expressing verbal affection. If participants had multiple examples of the same subthemes, they were coded together as representing one form of parental love. For example, if a parent cited giving hugs, kisses, and cuddling, the subtheme of showing physical affection was coded once for that parent. Following this coding stage, we then grouped the preliminary themes into larger overarching themes. For example, showing physical affection and expressing verbal affection became the larger theme of Demonstrating Affection. To represent the number of expressions of love provided by the participant, if a parent provided

examples of both showing physical affection and expressing verbal affection, he or she would be coded as providing two acts of Demonstrating Affection (e.g., n = 2).

Our analytic process veered from Braun and Clark's (2006) final two phases of defining and naming themes and producing a report, as these phases were not distinct in our process, but rather, we simultaneously wrote and critically reviewed the themes in an iterative fashion. Following phase 3, the first author drafted memos, which included the definition of the theme and direct quotes or examples that served as the preliminary descriptions of each theme. These memos were reviewed by the third author and revised throughout the final analytic stages, ultimately yielding five broad themes.

We ensured the rigor and accuracy of our analytic process by following and meeting Braun and Clarke's (2006) checklist for good thematic analysis studies. This included coding the data independently before comparing and discussing together and describing the resultant themes in detail along with providing exemplar quotes that emphasize congruence between our analyses and participants' own descriptions. In addition, we drew from best practices in qualitative research to further support the trustworthiness of the analyses (Creswell, 2012; Morse, 2015). Researchers engaged in reflexivity, which is the awareness and acknowledgment of how researchers' professional and personal contexts and experiences might shape methodological decisions and interpretations (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). For example, the first author was raised by his single mother and he may have experienced a wider range of acts of parental love from his mother as a result (e.g., wrestling), perhaps because she was less restrained by gender roles. The third author is an intersectional feminist who was raised by dual-earning, heterosexual parents who did not adhere to traditional parenting gender roles; thus, these experiences likely contributed to her recognition of gendered patterns in the data. As this study was primarily descriptive in nature, there was a low level of inference during the coding process, and thus, there was less room for bias intrusion on behalf of the researchers. Finally, the first author maintained a detailed methodological memo that outlined all of the analytical steps and decisions that were taken throughout the analysis process.

Results

We identified five themes of parental love acts as reported by fathers, mothers, and children using the thematic analysis: Playing or Doing Activities Together, Demonstrating Affection, Creating Structure, Helping or Supporting, and Giving Gifts or Treats. Table 1

provides the frequencies of the number of examples in each theme and, when applicable, the

subthemes. The total number of parental love acts that were provided and identified were 218 by

fathers, 209 by mothers, and 129 by children (60 about fathers; 69 about mothers). Mothers

averaged 3.60 examples (range 1-6), fathers averaged 3.76 examples (range 1-7), and children

averaged 1.03 examples (range 0-3) about fathers and 1.19 examples (range 0-3) about mothers.

Mothers and fathers primarily provided specific examples of parental love, but many

parents also commented on the frequency of demonstrating love towards their children. These

statements often described a type of ritual. Although most parents alluded to the notion of rituals,

Joseph[i] explicitly explained how he used rituals to show he cared for his children:

> My son always has a nap in the afternoon, and I wake him up from his nap to go
>
> pick up my daughter from school. So I get all his clothes out in a row, I meet him
>
> in his bed, I put his jacket on, and then before he's woken up, I have his bottle of
>
> juice and his shoes in the same spot every day. So every day he looks for his
>
> juice, like that's just the ritual.

In addition to the specific examples, some children (n = 12) said they knew their mothers

and fathers loved them, but when prompted to answer how they knew, they responded either "I

just know" or "I don't know" without providing an example of parental love. These types of

statements (17 examples) were almost all provided by younger children (n = 16; age 38-61

months) compared to older children (n = 1; 62-86 months) and were not included in the final

themes. There were also a number of children (n = 17) who did not respond at all or who

responded nonsensically to the questions. The remaining 556 examples, 129 provided by

children, were categorized into five themes of parental love. Beginning with the most frequently

reported parental love theme, we define the theme, provide exemplar quotes to enhance the

description, and address identified patterns specific to the study research questions (e.g., gender).

To note, percentages provided within each theme refer to the percentage of acts rather than

participants.

Playing or Doing Activities Together

Overall, the most common way of showing love to children was through playing or doing

activities together (237 acts; 43% of total acts). Playing or doing activities together included the

most commonly reported acts by fathers (51%) and children (36%), and the second most

common for mothers (37%). Subthemes included playing physically (e.g., wrestling), playing games or with toys (e.g., board games, dolls), doing arts and educational activities (e.g., reading), going to special places (e.g., library, grandma's house), and watching media (e.g., movies, sports). General statements about playing or doing fun things together were also included in this theme (e.g., "we play together"). Acts in this theme ranged in frequency of occurrence (e.g., daily versus rare occasion) with most occurring quite frequently (e.g., "we sing and dance a lot together," "we read a ton") except for going to special places (e.g., zoo, camping). As children were typically less descriptive of the types of play when compared to the parents, the subthemes of playing physically and playing games or with toys was identified based only on the parents' description.

Playing physically was the most common type of act among fathers in this theme (over 40%) and included both inside and outside activities such as wrestling, hide and seek, tag, riding bikes, playing sports. Mark said:

> [My son likes Thomas the Tank Engine], so when I get home from work, I do what we call 'choo choo.' I pick him up and I run him around in the living room and he gets to blow the whistle.

Doing arts and educational activities together (e.g., reading, coloring, baking) was the most common type of play among mothers (30%). Within this subtheme, reading was the most common act across all participant groups. Children cited playing and going to special places at similar rates (32%). However, male children cited playing together more often than female children (10 to 5 examples) and female children cited reading more often than male children (7 to 1 examples). For example, Henry expressed that he knows his father loves him because "I play in the backyard, and he plays with me," and Cindy shared that she knows her mother loves her "because she reads me books." Many parents also commented generally about the importance of providing individual attention to their children and that the activities they did together were guided by the child's needs and perspective. For example, Sharon expressed: "We try to do things that they like to do, and I try to listen to what they want to do. I say, 'What do you want to do?' and go with that."

Demonstrating Affection

The second most common way of expressing love to children was through demonstrating affection (208 acts; 37% of total acts). It was the most common act of parental love as reported by mothers (44%) and the second most common act reported by fathers (32%) and children (34%). Demonstrating affection included showing physical affection and expressing verbal affection. Many mothers and fathers described both types of affection as occurring together such as this father who said, "I hold their hands when I can, when they let me, give them hugs before bed, and tell them I love them before bed." Acts in this theme were almost uniformly described as specific acts such as hugs, kisses, or saying "I love you" and many parents and children described these acts as occurring often (e.g., "I give them lots of hugs," "telling them we love them a million times a day."). Examples of physical and verbal affection often occurred in moments when children were distressed or happy (e.g., when the child made a good grade). For example, Laura explained how she shows affection when her daughter is distressed by "rocking [her] before she goes to bed just to get her to calm down a little bit," further explaining that she likes "to kind of snuggle with her" because Katie "knows then that she is safe and secure." In addition, children cited demonstrations of affection more frequently when they were describing how they felt loved by their mothers compared to their fathers (29 examples compared to 15 examples).

Acts of physical affection (60%) were the most common subtheme for mothers and children across all five themes and made up approximately 20% of all parental love acts reported by mothers, fathers, and children. Physical affection included giving hugs and kisses, holding children on parents' lap, and snuggling in bed together. In contrast to the gendered pattern in the larger theme, children shared physical affection examples at similar rates when describing acts of love from their mothers and fathers. Acts of verbal affection (40%) were also described frequently by mothers, fathers, and children. The most common specific act of verbal affection was explicitly saying or hearing "I love you." For example, Jane explained that she knew her mommy loved her "because she told me one day when I was going to [my first day of] kindergarten." Verbal affection also included acts such as offering or receiving praise or compliments, teasing each other, and talking and listening with one another. Lisa explained:

> When I am the busiest that I'll be during the day, running around, doing two or
>
> three things, if there is something that is exciting to them, I'll try to stop

everything I am doing to listen to what they have to say. Make their feelings feel important, even if I think it's something kind of silly.

Creating Structure

The third most common theme of parental love as reported by participants was creating structure (45 acts, 8% of the total acts). Structure refers to the organization, rules, routines, and predictability of the home environment. Although some of these acts included parents and children spending time together, the acts focused more on the consistent nature of the acts rather than the enjoyment experienced during the activity. Parents and children shared roughly the same number of acts within this theme. Although creating structure was less frequently mentioned, this theme was salient for many participants and included acts such as disciplining, providing basic needs, eating meals together, doing household chores together, and participating in religious activities. For example, Patricia described how she included her children in household tasks, "[I] let them be involved with things that I am doing, like if I'm doing something on the computer or if I am making dinner. I try to find ways for them to help." Most examples were about providing for basic needs, which included preparing meals, keeping a clean house, getting them ready for school, and providing financially. Children's examples in this theme were similar to Vanessa's, who stated simply that she knows her mother loves her "[c]ause she makes breakfast for me."

Helping or Supporting

The fourth theme of parental love was helping or supporting. Overall, acts in this theme represented about 6% of all acts for mothers, fathers, and children (34 acts). Acts included general statements (e.g., "I help them") and specific acts such as helping with school work, teaching new things (e.g., go on walks to "discover things"), and providing support at difficult times or with relationships or activities (e.g., friendships, extracurricular activities). For example, Bobby explained how his father helped him ride his bike, "Because my daddy sometimes helps me ride my old two wheeler…he lets me go and I just ride and ride even on turns. And I don't even need any help on it." Lastly, Susan shared how she supported her children in social situations: "I'm there to kind of be supportive, not every time, but especially with a new friend, helping them if they get stuck with ideas of what to do."

Giving Gifts or Treats

The final way that parents showed love to their children was by giving gifts or treats. Although acts included in this theme were shared relatively infrequently by mothers, fathers, and children (32 acts; approximately 6% of all acts), all shared about how special treats (e.g., lollipops, ice cream) were an important way to show and feel love in their relationship as well as provide comfort when a child was distressed. Timothy, a father, offered how "once in a while, I'll buy them nice treats in the store when I keep saying no to them." Brian excitedly reported that his mother "gives me a lot of treats! She almost gave me three cookies once!" These acts of giving or buying treats shared by children were almost solely shared by the younger children (n = 9; age 38-61 months) compared to the older children (n = 1; age 62-86 months). Parents and children also explained how buying and giving toys and gifts was meaningful. Elizabeth, a mother, expressed, "Sometimes just for no particular reason [I] just surprise them with a new book, or some new playdoh, or something of that nature. Never terribly big gifts." Several parents also added that they did this sort of love act infrequently using such phrases as "we don't buy them all the time," "I try not to do this too much," or "once in a while."

Discussion

Although parental love is vital for children's healthy development (Khaleque, 2013; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), this study was the first to gather reports from both parents and their young children on how parental love is demonstrated. Within this sample of 58 two-parent, financially stable families, these reports revealed considerable variability in how parental love is demonstrated. There was also evidence that although some of the acts of parental love differed by gender, the themes of parental love described by children generally aligned with parents' themes of parental love, adding a unique perspective to the literature on parental love. In short, the themes identified here underscore the importance of parents being attuned and responsive to the specific and often unique needs of their children (Schore, & Schore, 2008).

How is Parental Love Commonly Demonstrated and Perceived?

The first two themes, Playing or Doing Activities Together and Demonstrating Affection, were particularly salient in the examples offered by fathers, mothers, and their children as they made up 80% of all the parental love acts. These themes are consistent with attachment theory, which suggests that parental love takes specific forms such as providing positive interactions, comfort in response to a child's distress, and structure (George & Solomon, 2008). Regarding positive interactions, the fact that playing and spending time together was a form of parental love

aligns with the United Nations' recognition of play as a human right for young children (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). The specific types of playing and spending time together that were mentioned frequently here such as physical play and reading also provide various developmental benefits for children, such as greater emotional regulation abilities and improved academic skills (Fagan et al., 2014; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). The theme of playing together is also perhaps less appreciated but may provide the necessary encouragement and modeling for children to feel comfortable exploring and taking appropriate risks (Grossmann et al., 2002). This variety of important parenting behaviors identified here then contributes to the broader literature on the development of attachment by valuing somewhat less-appreciated parenting behaviors (Cassidy et al., 2013).

In addition, given the prevalence of physical affection reported here, it is noteworthy that it had long been excluded as a prominent behavior in conceptualizations of supportive parenting (Barber & Thomas, 1986). Understandably, more attention has been paid to negative physical and verbal child-parent interactions due to the harmful consequences of physical and verbal abuse (Gershoff, 2013; Wang & Kenny, 2013). However, it is not merely the absence of negative interactions that determines the quality of parent-child relationships – the presence of positive interactions are vital as well (Altschul, Lee, & Gershoff, 2016). In particular, studies have supported the value of positive touch for children's development and well-being (Blackwell, 2000; Duhn, 2010). Consistent with the pioneering work by Harry Harlow (1958) on contact comfort, touch therefore appears to be an important medium through which parental love is expressed and perceived among the families in this study.

In contrast to the findings that align with attachment theory, relatively few parents and no children mentioned love in the form of providing comfort when a child is distressed, despite the empirical evidence of the importance of this interaction (Cassidy, 2008; Leerkes et al., 2009; McElwain & Booth-LaForce, 2006). Such an omission on the part of most parents and children in this study may be because love and affection are typically considered positive experiences and thus the context of a distressed child did not readily come to mind as an example of showing or receiving love. Future studies could inquire more specifically about if and how parents demonstrate love to their children in distressing moments (e.g., when a child is sad) to explore this potential theme of parental love. In this case, educators and practitioners may need to help

parents understand that providing an emotional safe haven for their children in difficult times (e.g., when a child is sad) is an important act of parental love.

Mothers as Nurturers, Fathers as Playmates

As to the role that gender plays in shaping expressions of parental love in this sample, although both mothers and fathers offered many examples of playing with and demonstrating affection towards their children, mothers emphasized the importance of physical and verbal affection while fathers' examples highlighted their role as playmates. Children's examples supported this difference as most of their examples of demonstrating affection referenced mothers rather than fathers. This gendered pattern reflects prior literature explaining that mothers and fathers in mother-father pairs may have equally valuable yet somewhat different relationships with their children due to their unique ways of demonstrating love (e.g., physical play; Palm, 2014; Paquette, 2004). There were also gender differences found between sons and daughters in the theme of Playing and Doing Activities Together as sons provided more examples of physically playing together, whereas daughters emphasized reading and arts and crafts. Thus, the ways that parents and children experience parental love in this study seem to reflect traditional gender role stereotypes (i.e., females as nurturers, males as playmates), though this stereotyped pattern does not diminish the meaningfulness of the experiences of parental love.

Findings also show the many ways fathers can meaningfully express their love to their children. This variety is key as scholars have noted that much of the parenting research that has been conducted has used mothering as the standard in which to understand fathering (Stolz, Barber, & Olsen, 2005). However, when asking the fathers and the children themselves, it is noteworthy that they regard playing (physically) as a valuable form of love and affection. Many attachment scholars now recognize the role that fathers often fulfill (i.e., playmates, secure base to explore) may be just as important as mothers and mothering (i.e., caregiver, safe haven to receive comfort) for children to have all of the necessary attachment-related experiences early in life (Newland & Coyl, 2010; Palm, 2014).

Such gender roles are typically considered to be a product of both temperament and socialization (Else-Quest, Hyde, Goldsmith, & Van Hulle, 2006; Leaper & Friedman, 2007; Lytton & Romney, 1991). Therefore, it is unknown whether biological sex differences directly shaped how parental love is described here or whether these gender differences are more of a result of gender socialization. Considering the effects of socialization, these gender differences

may represent how parents feel more comfortable performing certain types of expressions of love due to their past experiences and current societal expectations. Furthermore, children may not necessarily benefit most from a parent of a certain gender demonstrating specific acts (e.g., mothers being physically affectionate); instead, children can feel loved as a parent of either gender demonstrates love in any meaningful way (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). This is particularly relevant for single parents or same-sex parents, where parents can still ensure that their children feel loved through the ways identified here even if the acts appear contrary to societal gendered stereotypes (e.g., fathers being physically affectionate, mothers playing physically). Regardless of gender or family structure, what is key is that parents are demonstrating their love in ways that their children perceive as meaningful.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the strengths of this study, there are limitations worth noting. First, the specific characteristics of most of these families (e.g., young children, financially stable, European American, happily married heterosexual couples) likely shaped the acts of parental love that were provided. For example, lower income families may not have sufficient resources to access a library or purchase books to read with their children, but still provide the necessary love acts of physical and verbal affection, and plenty of opportunities to play with their children. Furthermore, other cultures may have different norms for parenting styles or behaviors, which could alter the themes or proportions of the acts found here (Deater-Deckard et al., 2011). For example, Latino mothers have been found to be more directive with their children and so may be more likely to report acts of parental love in the form of giving advice (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). Future research could compare the results found here with examples from other families who differ in structure or other characteristics (e.g., income, race/ethnicity, marital stability; same-sex couples), as more diverse samples might generate different but equally important themes of parental love.

Second, although many children provided coherent examples of parental love, the young age of the children (i.e., 3 to 7 years old) certainly shaped how they perceived and consequently described acts of parental love. The young age and perhaps accompanying limited understanding was evident as only half of the children provided useable examples of parental love (Widen & Russell, 2008). Yet, the children's perspectives provided additional information not examined in previous work, as well as much needed insights into how children at this age perceive parental

love. Future research examining expressions of parental love with children of different ages would be valuable as children typically become less physically and emotionally dependent on their parents over time, despite the continued importance of parental love (Hair, Moore, Garrett, Ling, & Cleveland, 2008; Steinberg, 2001). For example, the increase in conflict and decrease in warmth, closeness, and support that characterizes the parent-adolescent relationship may alter how parents express their love (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; McGue, Elkins, Walden, & Iacono, 2005). In particular, parents may need to be more flexible in how they demonstrate their love to their adolescents according to the evolving needs of their developing children.

Finally, the wording of the question asked of parents (i.e., "What types of things do you do with your children that shows them you feel affectionate or loving toward them?") may have elicited more examples of physical and verbal affection. However, as the examples of affection such as giving hugs or praising can be considered expressions of love as well (Rohner et al., 2005), the wording of the question may have only influenced the frequency at which those types of examples were provided. Thus, given that parental love is valuable for all children, the ways that parents demonstrate their love and the ways that children perceive that love needs to continue to be explored and better understood across diverse family contexts and across the lifespan.

Conclusion

Benefiting from real-life examples provided by parents and children, this study identified common ways that parents demonstrate love to their children and children perceive love from their parents in these two-parent, financially stable families. The themes of parental love identified here reflect and extend previous conceptualizations by highlighting the importance of two themes in particular—playing or doing activities together and demonstrating affection— especially for fathers' love. The importance of these types of loving acts from parents and children should inform relevant programs and interventions to have a similar emphasis, potentially to facilitate the benefits of parental love for children. For example, practitioners could assess the ways parents and children show and perceive love within their relationship and discuss and particularly emphasize the importance of playing together (e.g., wrestling, reading) and acts of physical and verbal affection for young children. In addition, the examples of playing, spending time together, and demonstrating affection were typically simple acts such as wrestling, playing hide and seek, and giving hugs and kisses. This finding is consistent with Ginsburg's

(2007) thesis that, "Parents need to not passively accept the media and advertising messages that suggest there are more valuable means of promoting success and happiness in children than the tried, trusted, and traditional methods of play and family togetherness" (p. 187). Thus, programs aimed at improving parent-child relationships do not need to promote elaborate or complex interactions or methods of expressing parental love. The lay examples provided by parents and children here instead underscore the importance of parents being attuned and responsive to the specific, yet often simple needs of their children.

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Table 1. Frequencies of themes of parental love acts as reported by children, mothers, and fathers

THEME OF PARENTAL LOVE ACTS	CHILD	MOTHER	FATHER	TOTAL
Playing or Doing Activities Together	47	78	112	237

Playing	15			
Playing physically	-	20	47	
Playing games or with toys	-	10	21	
Doing arts and educational activities	8	23	17	
Going to special places	15	9	8	
Watching media	4	2	10	
Demonstrating Affection	44	94	70	208
Showing physical affection	30	51	43	
Expressing verbal affection	14	43	27	
Creating Structure	16	14	15	45
Helping or Supporting	12	9	13	34
Giving Gifts or Treats	10	14	8	32
TOTAL	129	209	218	556

[i] All names are pseudonyms