

7 A'S – STEPS TO A LOVING FAMILY RELATIONSHIP

– Josh D. & Dottie McDowell

Introduction

There are no guarantees. None! You can be the greatest parent in the world and do everything right, but there's absolutely no guarantee that your child won't grow up and walk away from you or walk away from his or her faith.

However, if we build a relationship with that child, the chance of that ultimate rebellion happening is very small. What usually brings children back is not all the truth you've taught but what kind of relationship you have built with them.

Although you may be experiencing a rocky relationship with your child right now, it's never too late to start where you are. We must connect with our kids **relationally** to overcome their resistance to our guidance and instruction.

We can apply biblical principles that provide relational connecting points to meet real needs in our kids' lives. These points, represented by the following seven "A's," help shape our young people mentally, emotionally, and spiritually to be receptive to right thinking and behavior, thus avoiding the traps of the culture around them.

1) **AFFIRMATION.** One of the most effective ways of identifying with your children, even when you don't fully understand them, is to affirm their feelings. To **affirm** means to "validate or confirm."

When we affirm the feelings of our young people, we give them a sense of authenticity.

"When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow." (Romans 12:15 NLT)

Affirming their feelings tells them that they are real individuals with valid feelings. When we identify with their feelings of excitement or

disappointment, we let them know that we care and that they are understood for who they really are – authentic human beings.

Dottie had an encounter with another mom which reinforces just how important affirmation is to our kids and especially how critical it is when it comes from the father.

“Yesterday I talked to a very discouraged California mother of a teenage boy. She shared that he had just gotten his driver’s permit and was beginning to drive. She and her husband had taken him out to practice driving, and he did beautifully. This conscientious mom wanted to capture the moment to encourage her son, so she said something like, “Great job! I’m proud of how carefully you’re driving!” Then she nudged her husband to encourage him to say something positive, but he got angry at her, conveying that it is silly to say something that he felt was simply so obvious.

This mom was very discouraged. She said he almost never affirms their son and spends a great amount of time in conflict with him, griping and emphasizing his faults and any mistakes, rather than praising him. She described her son as an excellent student, a leader in his youth group, and excellent in sports. She said he appears confident and outgoing to everyone else, but underneath she knows he is suffering, because he is getting no affirmation from the most important man in his life — his dad.

After mulling over this conversation, Dottie has some pertinent questions for dads along with some important words of advice.

Dads, do you see that this dad is missing the boat? Do you see that he is missing opportunities to encourage his son? I urge you not to make this same mistake. Choose to be a dad who looks for opportunities to affirm your children. It is a decision that will pay off for the rest of your life and the lives of your children. I’m so glad my dad and my husband made this choice. I hope you will, too.”

- 2) **ACCEPTANCE.** Your acceptance helps your kids believe that you will still love them no matter what happens. Acceptance is embracing people for **who** they are rather than for **what** they do.

When we accept young people for who they are, we give them a sense of security.

“So, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you; then God will be glorified.” (Romans 15:7 NLT)

When your young people feel accepted by you, they are more likely to be vulnerable and transparent, opening up greater trust between you and your child.

Acceptance becomes real to us when we can point to a situation where someone demonstrated unconditional acceptance to us. It is then we know how important it is to show other that same acceptance, especially to our children. Dottie experience this in another situation involving teens behind the wheel; in this situation, she was the teen.

“I have so many memories of my folks telling me, “Dorothy, don't ever forget this: There is nothing that you could ever do – NOTHING! – that could cause us to stop loving you.” They told me this over and over when I was growing up, and it was simply “normal” for me to hear those words.

OK...Fast forward to one day when I was 16 and had just gotten my driver's license. I was driving home from my best friend's house and clearly recall approaching a busy intersection and telling myself, “Be careful. This is a really busy intersection so be careful turning left”. The next thing I knew, my car and a little Volkswagen bug collided and I was sitting, unhurt, in a destroyed car stuck in the middle of an intersection. To this day, I honestly don't have the slightest idea HOW it happened! But too say that I was shook up – and extremely embarrassed – was an enormous understatement. Somehow, I managed to climb out of the car and was rescued by a

really nice lady from the drug store right there on the corner. She had seen the whole thing and offered to take me in to the store so that I could call my folks.

Well, that wasn't the easiest phone call to make. I had just totaled the car! I reached my mom and told her what happened and where I was. She called my dad, who immediately dropped everything and raced right over there to meet me. When he arrived, I was NEVER so happy to see anyone in my life! He gave the police all the information that they needed and took me home.

I want you to know that my Dad kept telling me that the ONLY thing that mattered was that I was OK and not hurt. He NEVER ONCE asked me what in the world I was thinking, if I had been "watching" the road, if the radio was on – or was too loud, HOW I could have done this, or ANY other "logical" question that a dad might ask a 16-year-old who had just wrecked the car. Never once did he mention how expensive the car was or that this would cause our insurance rates to go up! To this very day (and my dad is now 88 years old) he has only expressed how happy he was that I wasn't hurt.

This was a concrete and compassionate demonstration of unconditional acceptance. If I ever felt like I needed acceptance, (and not a lecture or a million questions!) it was on that day! Do your kids know that you accept them unconditionally? They need to know.”

- 3) **APPRECIATION.** While acceptance is the foundation for a secure relationship, appreciation can be considered a cornerstone. Appreciation conveys to young people that they are valued and their accomplishments make a difference.

When we express appreciation to young people, we give them a sense of significance – the feeling or thought that they've done or said something worthwhile.

“And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him.’” (Matthew 3:17 NLT)

While acceptance of young people tells them that their **being** matters, expressing our appreciation to them says that their **doing** matters, too.

Catch your children doing something right and show appreciation. I'm convinced that the more I caught my three daughters and son doing things right and expressed appreciation, the less there was to catch them doing things wrong.

The practice Dottie and I had as parents showing appreciation for right behaviors with our children is now being carried out with the next generation as Dottie expresses appreciation to our grandson.

“When I think of communicating appreciation to children, I think of our 3-year-old grandson, Scottie James. He's a wonderful big brother to his 4-month-old little sister, Shauna! But, like most preschoolers, he's a bit rough and tough with his baby sister when he's trying to express affection to her. He'll hug her – and I'll wonder if she'll make it out alive! He'll kiss her and I hold my breath! I sometimes feel like a referee when they are together – with my primary objective just to keep the baby safe! But this is where we, as adults, have ideal opportunities! When an older sibling does express sincere tenderness toward the new baby, it's our big chance to communicate appreciation and pride. You know how much we as adults enjoy heartfelt appreciation? Imagine how motivating it is to a three-year-old! So, when I see Scottie James being tender to his sister, I say something like, "Wow Scottie! Grammy is SO-0-0-0 proud of how gentle you are with your baby! You are such a big boy and such a remarkable brother. I sure am proud of you!" Experience has taught me that, even though it may take time, this expression of appreciation should help to motivate Scottie and encourage continued gentle behavior.”

- 4) **AFFECTION.** Expressing affection to our kids through loving words and appropriate touch communicates that they are worth loving.

When we show affection to young people, we give them a sense of lovability.

“Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” (1 John 4:7 NLT)

Every expression of care and closeness provides emotional reinforcement, helping kids realize that they are loved.

Affection can be expressed verbally and through appropriate physical expression. We can say “I love you,” to our children through a variety of verbal expressions which I made my goal to do with each of my children, either in person or over the phone, ten times a day. Appropriate physical expression is conveyed through a hug, kiss, peck on the cheek, arm around the shoulder, embrace, or holding their hand.

Affection speaks volumes to our children. Dottie’s mother had a way of verbally expressing affection to her that made such an impact. It modeled the way Dottie shows affection to our children today. I thank God it has made an indelible impression on our kids, as well. Each one of our children know they are deeply loved.

“My mom was a genius at communicating affection to her children. She had so many creative ways to let us know how much she delighted in each one of us. ONE very powerful thing that she ALWAYS did was to warmly greet us EVERY time we'd walk into her presence. It didn't matter if we had been gone 5 hours or 5 minutes. The moment we'd walk in from being away from her, she'd grab that opportunity to communicate her delight in seeing us. She'd greet us with an enthusiastic hello, A BIG HUG, and always express eagerness to listen to anything we had to say.

What did this communicate to me? It was a very clear message that my mom was happy to just BE with me, AND that she was eager to know what was important to me. Did this help me understand that I was lovable and treasured?

Absolutely!

So, Because of my mom's example, when we had our children, I did the same thing that she had done. It made perfect sense to me – I had seen it modeled myself.

I didn't think too much about it until 3 or 4 years ago when one of our daughters was asked to introduce me at a speaking engagement that I had. In the course of that introduction, she mentioned that every time she'd come into a room where I was, I'd greet her enthusiastically and affectionately. She then shared how much it always meant to her. I was grateful for my mother's affectionate example to consistently communicate to her children how important we were to her - with words and hugs. Let me encourage you to do the same. Be yourself. Do it your own way. But, look at each time your children appear as an opportunity to remind them how much they are cherished and adored by you. I don't believe that you can overdo it if it is done sincerely. Hey! Life is too short NOT to do this!"

- 5) **AVAILABILITY.** Expressing affirmation, acceptance, appreciation, and affection to our kids is critical, but we can only do that if we make ourselves available to them.

When we make ourselves available to young people, we give them a sense of importance in our lives.

“The Lord is close to all who call on Him, yes, to all who call on Him sincerely.” (Psalm 145:18 NLT)

When we're not available, we are in essence saying, “Yes, I love you, but other things still come ahead of you.” You see, kids spell love **T-I-M-E**.

My wife, Dottie, is one of the wisest women I know. Once when my children were young, she lovingly confronted me and said, “Honey, you're not available to our children. You don't spend time with them, and you will deeply regret it later in life.”

She went on to share what I think is some of the greatest wisdom a person has ever shared with me. She said, “If you spend time with your children

now, they'll spend time with you later. If you love them now, they'll love you later. If you talk to them now, they'll listen to you later. If you listen to your children now, they will talk to you later. If you hug them now, they will hug you later."

Being there when your young people need you will not only tell them that they are important to you, it will keep you relationally connected to them.

We have our own agenda as to how we plan to spend our time, and then there is God's agenda for how He wants us to spend our time. When we look back, it is at those times when we chose God's agenda over our own that we are most blessed. Dottie has a particularly fond memory of making time for Heather at an important time in her life.

"You know, our kids want and need us to be available to them no matter what ages they are! They NEVER stop hoping that we will reach out to involve and include them in our ideas, our plans, our affection,....OR, that we will be available to welcome their ideas, their plans and their affection

It is a two way street, but must first be initiated by us.....the adults, the parents.

This summer has been really busy. Last month I was home for a total of three days, in between several trips I took with Josh. Those three days were in a row, in the middle of one week. I had big plans for that short time. I needed to unpack, do laundry, iron, repack, visit the post office, the bank, the drug store, Target, the doctor, etc. etc. etc.....

As soon as I got home, our daughter Heather called excited about moving into her first house as a college senior. She asked if I would take a day to help her move in, get some furniture for her room and get her settled. In a flash, my mind raced to what I had to accomplish during that 72-hour period before I could leave on the next trip. I wondered if I could pull off what I needed to do in two days instead of three! But, after a quick tug-of-war in my mind, I knew that being with Heather was far more important.

She came home, picked me up, and we set off to find a mattress for a bed someone had given her. Then we searched at the Salvation Army, Good Will store and second hand shops to find some furniture. (Remember, she

had the budget of a college kid!). To our delight, we found an old dresser for \$46 and some matching end tables for \$10 each! We then headed to Home Depot for paint, paint brushes, sandpaper, a drop cloth and those fashionable Home Depot caps so that we could transform this furniture into pieces of art. We sanded, scraped, and prepared the items to be painted. And! Wow! If I do say so myself, they turned out amazing! She has an adorable room in her first house (which she shares with 5 other girls), and I got to be a part of it!

It makes me sad to think of what I would have missed if I had chosen to do the "pressing" things I thought I had to do during those three days home. Maybe I didn't have my clothes as well organized as I had hoped I would for the next trip, and maybe I wasn't able to get everything I felt like I needed at the drug store. But, in light of eternity, which was more important? I now have the precious memory of sharing the excitement my daughter had of moving into her first house and the memory of her saying to me, "Thanks, Mom! There is no one else in the world I would have rather done this with than you!" The memory of that day will last a lifetime. Racing to the drug store, organizing my suitcases and running to the post office to go through piles and piles of mail would have been forgotten the next day. Make a choice to be available to your kids, no matter what ages they are! The benefits last forever."

- 6) **APPROACH.** We need to find out what is significant to our kids, no matter how old they are (it changes with age, of course), and then step into that world...or...approach their world. God, through Jesus, approached our world, and we need to apply that same principle with our young people.

When we approach our children's world, we say to them, "I care about you and what you are interested in."

"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith,

is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.” (I Corinthians 13:4-7) When we step into their world, it shows them we care about what they care about. That is the beginning of family and relationships.

Dottie knows how important it has always been for me to be the kind of dad my kids need, even when I didn't know exactly what that meant since it had never been modeled for me by my own father. I thank God for healthy role models who taught me how to enter my kids' worlds.

“My mother always said (and I quote), “A person will raise his or her children the way that he or she was raised, unless that person is reprogrammed.” Let me repeat that: “A person will raise his or her children the way that he or she was raised unless that person is reprogrammed”.

My husband is an amazing example of someone who CHOSE to be reprogrammed and CHOSE to end the pattern of dysfunction in which he was raised. He was definitely NOT raised in an encouraging environment where there were positive role models. When he became a dad, he had to start from scratch in learning ways to relate to and encourage his children.

Josh wanted to be an effective dad.... and he was determined. So, he understood that the best way to do that would be to jump into his children's worlds. Because he didn't have models growing up, he became a student of healthy families, watching the way that dads – whom he respected – would interact with their children, watching my own dad, and reading book after book. He made a decision to listen to his kids, to observe what was important to them, and to jump into their worlds. I saw him go anywhere our kids were! For a dad who was on the road a great deal, he was the dad who came to their events more than ANY of the other dads who never even traveled at all. He pursued the things that captivated their hearts, whether it was basketball or ANY school sport, raising goats, youth group activities, collecting Star Wars figures, tea parties, shopping, coloring, snowmobiling or jumping on beds, etc. He was there for his kids and let them know, in many creative ways, that he was interested in their worlds.

One time our son Sean was playing an important high school basketball game. Josh was in Russia, but flew 17 hours home for the game, and the moment it was over, raced back to LAX to travel the 17 hours back. Another time he flew in from Europe and literally, the moment he got home, took Katie and several of her junior high friends to Disneyland. If you've ever flown overseas, you can appreciate how exhausting that would be! Another time, at their request, Josh let Kelly and her best friend design his hair any way they wanted and then took them out to dinner, showing off his wild hairdo. That took real courage, but he became a hero to the girls! Another time, the very day that Heather lost her dog, he took her right out to get a new puppy.

I'm so proud of Josh and the decisions he made, in spite of the fact that he never saw these things modeled. He chose to put his kids before his work and before his own interests. It paid off in the lives of our children. Fathers, have you made that decision with your children? It won't be long before they're gone and you can't go back. You'll always have work. You won't always have little people whom you can impact in a way that only you, as their dad, can."

- 7) **ACCOUNTABILITY.** To connect relationally with our children, we need to show them affirmation, acceptance, appreciation, affection, availability and a sincere enthusiasm to approach their world. Still, if we do not balance these relational connecting points with loving limits and boundaries, young people will not learn responsibility.

When we provide loving accountability to our young people, we give them a sense of responsibility.

“Yes, each of us will have to give a personal account to God.” (Romans 14:12 NLT)

Accountability provides the parameters within which a young person can operate safely and securely. Young people need the loving authority of parents and caring adults so they can learn to make responsible, right choices. Sadly, without parameters, there is only confusion and chaos.

Our young people live in a world that offers innumerable opportunities for making choices that affect their future, whether positively or negatively. It is our responsibility as loving parents to help them make wise choices. Dottie discovered as a teen that she knew she needed to provide a system of accountability when she had teens of her own.

“The thing that comes to mind when I think about accountability is how we handled dating curfews with our youngest child. The way that we would decide when to have her come in after a date was based on a system of accountability. Let me give you a little background.

When I was a teenager and was dating, my parents wanted to communicate to me that they trusted me explicitly. The way that they did this was by giving me the privilege to come in from a date when I felt it was a reasonable time. The only problem with this approach was that there were times, because of my immaturity and inexperience, that I clearly remember feeling like I didn't know how to handle certain situations. I remember wishing that I had a curfew so that I could conveniently blame my parents if I wanted to go home. I also remember thinking: "Hmmm....when I have teenagers, I'm going to give them a curfew so they could hopefully avoid the kinds of delicate situations that I remembered facing.

So! Keeping that in mind, when it came to Heather's curfew, we involved her in the process. We'd first ask when the event would be over. Then we'd ask if they planned to go out to eat or anywhere else after the event. We'd ask her when she thought would be a fair curfew and then we'd set the time together. We also had the understanding that if she knew ahead of time that she couldn't make the curfew, she only had to call BEFORE that time to let us know that she would be late, so that we could readjust the expected arrival time. We felt like this was a fair "give and take", a situation where she had input, yet the final time was decided upon as a team. We felt that it was an effective way to communicate our trust in her while also encouraging accountability.”

Learn the Fatherhood Craft (by Dr. Stephen F. Duncan, Ph.D.)

- **"Have regular one-on-one time with each child.** Sometimes it's fun to talk while you're doing errands or making home repairs, but be sure that there are times that you turn off the TV, put down the newspaper, and give your kids your undivided attention. Schedule a daddy-daughter or daddy-son date occasionally. Go out to eat a favorite meal or to do an activity the child enjoys. Sit with them occasionally just before bed and talk about how the day went."
- **"Show affection often.** Even if older kids seem squeamish, kids enjoy a hug and encouraging words now and then from their dad. With the older kids you may want to do this in private, though, rather than in range of their friends."
- **"Take kids to work.** This is a great way to teach them about the world of work that you are a part of. Take kids with you on business trips when possible."
- **"Stay connected when you have to be away.** Sometimes work takes dads out of town. Set up a routine to stay connected. Some family's schedule a specific time Dad will call that is convenient for all members of the family. When you return, bring home something special for the kids. It need not be extravagant. My younger children have been thrilled to receive wing pins from an airline."
- **"Teach them.** No dad has every gift or skill. Kids may learn certain things from other males in their lives. Use opportunities to share *your* talents. In my family, I lack mechanical ability, but I have passed on the gift of music through providing piano and drum lessons to my children."
- **"Connect with your child at all levels.** Make sure you have some contact with every aspect of your child's life. Visit the school, meet the teacher and kids and have at least fleeting contact with an after-school activity. If you have seen where your children are and met their friends, you will have more to talk about and more interesting conversations. Parent involvement during children's schooling is critical to their school success. Work with your employer to see that your work schedule doesn't preclude your involvement in your child's schooling."

(Stephen F. Duncan, Ph.D., "The Importance of Fathers," Montana State University Extension Service, Human Development B-6 (Family Life) June, 2000 Mont Guide Fact Sheet #20008/Human Resource Development, www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/mt2000-08.html)