

# Gestures that Instruct the Heart

*Let's TALK Kids*

Claudia Quigg

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Years ago my father taught me a concept I think about every day. He taught me about using common gestures to instruct my heart.

When someone walks into a room, he reasoned, you should stand up. You aren't necessarily standing up because the person entering needs you to; indeed, she may look at you with wonder. You stand up to remind yourself about respecting people. You do the action first—standing—and the feeling follows—respect. Your actions can actually teach your heart how to feel.

My dad also makes it a point to learn the name of everyone he meets—from corporate bigwig to homeless man on the street—and to call people by their names. This discipline, he says, teaches his heart about the value of every person.

Living in a family, many of our actions become routine, or even perfunctory. We tell each other “good morning” before we are even awake enough to formulate our wishes for the other's day. We hug goodbye and hello as our minds race ahead to clocking in at work or getting dinner started at home.

And yet these gestures build meaning upon meaning as they imbue our lives with a sense of caring.

In many families, some special effort conveys love in a unique way. Do you write a love note on a napkin before putting it inside a brown bag lunch? Such a gesture instructs two hearts. It reinforces love for a sleepy dad packing lunches at 6 am when he would rather still be in bed. And it speaks volumes to the heart of the child who—six hours later—has a concrete reminder about how much her dad loves her.

I have been reflecting on one simple gesture our family used when our kids were young.



Back in the days when our children went to summer camp, we always got the address of the camp ahead of time. A few days before they left, we would write and mail letters to them so that they would have mail on the very first day of camp.

I had forgotten about those advance letters until recently when our 27-year-old daughter reminisced with me about how magical that seemed. She said she was always the only one to receive mail on that first day. She remembers that the first day of camp was sometimes a hard day—you haven't made friends yet, and you might be a tad homesick. Having that letter made a difference for her, somehow reminding her that she was safe and secure and would be just fine.

The irony is that I remember one year as I was trying to get that letter written, the children in my house were behaving like wild animals. I couldn't wait to ship two of them off to camp, or even to a zoo. I remember the discipline it required of me to write funny, loving, gee-how-I-miss-you letters when I was actually counting the hours until they left. And yet, the very act of writing those letters reminded me that I really was going to miss them. I knew even then that—at the time they would be reading their letters—every word would be true.

What special effort says “I love you” in your family? You may think you're just writing your love on a napkin packed into a lunchbox, but you may really be writing it on someone's heart.

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