"5 Tips for Loving Your Unlovable Teenager"
by Jim Burns, Ph.D.

With teenagers in the house, there are times that most parents find it difficult to love our kids. Usually such struggles are brief; troubles resolve and emotions settle. We get on with life. Yet, for some parents, living with an out of control or very difficult teenager is a daily ordeal. Some kids are hard to express love to – even though parents truly love them. Regardless of your life situation – parents can resort to shame-based parenting when their teenagers become difficult to live with. Shame-based parenting, when parents attempt to influence their children's behavior through shaming, nagging and negativity simply does not work in the long run. Shame-based parenting may gain an initial victory, but in the end, a parent's relationship with their kids will suffer. As an alternative to shame-based parenting, let me offer five tips for loving your unlovable teenager.

1. Place relational "deposits" in your teenager's emotional bank account.
Relational deposits can make your kids feel loved and accepted even in the midst of discipline. Here are some deposits you can make:

- Saying "I'm sorry" to your children when you blow it
- Forgiving them
- Hugging often
- Saying "I love you" every day
- Speaking with a tender tone of voice
- Playing together
- Spending time together

2. Avoid making relational "withdrawals" from your teenager's emotional bank account.
Relational withdrawals teach kids that nothing is ever good enough for mom or dad, and result in kids giving up or acting out. Here are some withdrawals to avoid:

- Nagging
- Belittling them
- Being sarcastic
- Making negative put-downs
- Criticizing
- Screaming
- Heaping guilt on them
- Never saying "I'm sorry"

3. Affirm your teen whenever possible.
Most often, the difference between kids who make it and kids who don't is one caring adult. Even if you struggle with your teenager, I challenge you to believe in them! Most teenagers suffer from low self-esteem – and I almost always see this is cases where teens struggle with their parents. Low self-esteem is a vicious cycle that when left unaddressed creates an even more unlovable teenager. Kids with low self-esteem tend to make poor decisions socially, in regards to drugs and sexuality – and academically. Kids with low self-esteem often act out rebelliously with their parents. Their move to a lower standard of behavior is often due to the way they perceive of themselves. Parents can make a huge difference in their teenager's life by affirming them,

praising them and believing (even in the midst of struggle) in the person they can become. When your teen has wronged you, forgive them. Restore them. Move on. (See the story of Jesus and Simon Peter in the Gospel of John as an example of this.)

4. Demonstrate affection towards your teenager.
Make it your goal to create a home environment of warmth and affection. You may rightly say, "Hey, I'm reading this article because I'm having trouble expressing love to my teenager. Now you're telling me to love my teenager. How is that helpful?" I understand your point. That's why I want to encourage you to take "baby steps" in this area.

Taking baby steps means that if you have behavior issues to discuss with your teenager when he or she gets home from school – wait. Instead, take your kid out for his or her favorite junk food. Don't bring up your issues. Instead, spend your time talking and listening to anything your teenager wants to talk about. Don't ask probing questions. Don't make accusations. Talk with your son or daughter the way his or her friends would talk with him or her. Your teenager, of course, will be waiting for the hammer to drop, but bite your tongue and don't drop that hammer. Keep the conversation warm and friendly. When you are finished, give your teenager a hug and tell him or her how much you enjoyed being together. You still have your issues, don't you? So now, after some hang-out time with your teenager, ask him or her when would be a good time to go over some of those issues. You'll usually get a better reception. Remember, baby steps.

5. Provide lots of encouragement to your teenager.
Don't withhold your emotional support from your teenager. Keep telling them that you love them – even when it's hard to feel loving. Loving your teenager unconditionally is more than expressing feeling or words – it has much to do with action (see 1 John 3:18.) Build up your teenager. Strengthen them through your words and actions. Challenge them to become all that God has created them to be!

6. The Burns' bonus tip: pray!
If you are having a difficult time loving your teenager today, I challenge you to pray! God hasn't given up on your child – or you! Pray for your teenager! Pray for yourself – that God would give you the inner resources to help you respond to your teenager in ways that are helpful and loving (which often times means setting boundaries and providing consistent discipline, by the way.) Never forget that God loves your teenager even more than you do, and that He is faithful and able to work in your son or daughter's life – in His own perfect timing.