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## Perception of Parental Love in 4-6 Year-Old Children

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### Abstract

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During childhood, establishing a healthy bond of love between parents and children is the most important requirement. Feeling and expressing types of love vary in this period. 'This study aims to describe the typologies of 4 - 6 year old children's perception of their parents' love for them. The sample of the study consisted of 240 children. The data in this study were obtained from face to face interviews with children by using the mixed methods. Children were asked questions like "How do you know that your mother/father loves you?". The content analysis of the data obtained from the interviews with children was made. Categories were established about the children's perception types for parental love. Percent and frequency values of descriptive data were calculated. Differences in gender and age of the children were analyzed with chi-square analysis. When the similarities and differences in children's expression were analyzed; six different categories were found in parental love perception types of children. These categories were physical contact with parents, parental approval words, spending quality time with parents, being given presents by parent, ensuring basic needs of child by parent and meeting parental expectations. In terms of the gender of the child and parent, significant differences among the types of parental love perception were found. This study drew attention to typologies of the perceptions of parental love generated by children. Considering that in the early years of childhood, healthy parent-child relationship is very much effective upon their relationship throughout the life of individuals; data obtained from research provide important contributions to the field.

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**Keywords:** Parental love, love expression, early childhood.

### 1. Introduction

Love is composed of emotions that motivate someone to show close interest in and devotion to something or somebody else (Bakırcıoğlu, 2012). Although there is no a specific method to learn love; it is possible to express love differently like parental love, love for friend, love for teaching profession, love for country, nature love etc. (Gao, 2014; Määttä, 2010; Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012a & 2012b).



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To love a child is one of the most generous love (Duyan & Gelbay, 2008). Parents' attitudes shaped by love in parent-child relation result in strong ties between parents and child (Fredrickson, 1998; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Soysal et al., 2005). In this process, it is not easy to develop and to protect the relation between parents and child. It is important that both parents and child should have positive life experiences. Experiencing love includes answering needs, being in safe, caring and sharing time (D'Cruz & Stagnitti, 2010). For example; caring and protecting children attentively and passionately, supporting their first walk attempts, consoling them when they are sad, etc. can be regarded as significant steps in composing these ties (Maslow, 1943; Baumrind 1966 & 1997).

Love is a fact that progresses and is enhanced. For Fredrickson (2004); love is an encouraging emotion that improves thinking and action repertoire of individuals. Positive emotions help solve child's developmental and growth problems (Fredrickson, 1998). Therefore; having positive love experiences play a crucial role in the development of child's basic feeling of confidence. During this process, physical behaviors (hugging, kissing, protecting, fondling, giving presents) and verbal behaviors (praise, compliments, praising child's positive behaviors) are significant actions for child to learn behaviors (Rohner et al., 2005). It is not possible to argue a healthy human growth in a place where love does not exist (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011). The studies indicate that positive love experiences in parent-child relations generate such positive outcomes as self-confidence, high self- concept, balanced emotional life, ability to control behaviors and empathy among children (Cox, 2003; Hungerford & Cox, 2006; McIntyre & Dusek, 1995; Young et al., 1995).

### *1.1 Purpose of the study & research questions*

When love is discussed as an emotion; types of feeling, identifying and expressing love may vary. In this sense; it is important to know how parents demonstrate their love expressions and statements and how children perceive these love expressions and statements. Therefore; it was studied how children aged 4-6 years understood how their parents love them and answers to the following questions were sought:

- Does parental love perceived by children aged 4-6 years differ?
- Does parental love perceived by children aged 4-6 years differ significantly in terms of gender of the children?
- Does parental love perceived by children aged 4-6 years differ significantly in terms of age of the children?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants*

The sample of the study was recruited using random sampling method among the children aged 4-6 years who attended to pre-school education facilities in Erzincan Province, Turkey. The sample included a total of 240 children -120 girls (50%) and 120 boys (50%)-. Of these children; 81

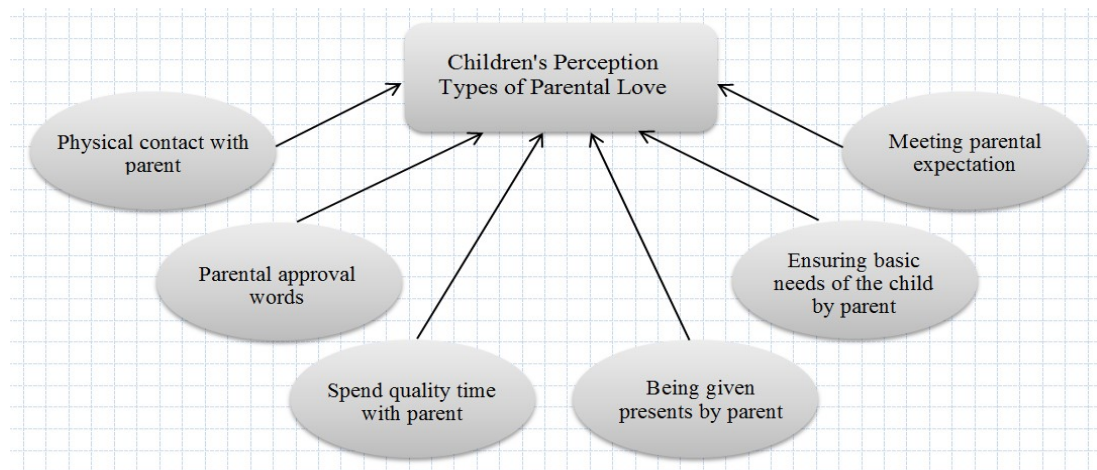
children were aged 4 years (33.8%), 79 children were aged 5 years (32.9%) and 80 children were aged 6 years (33.3%).

### 2.1 Data collection and analysis

The data of the study were collected by the researchers through separate interviews that took 10-15 minutes for each child. During the interview; the first question was “How do you understand that your parents love you?”. Then; the children were asked to draw and to describe a picture about the topic that “My parents love me because...”. During the interviews; descriptions, ages and gender of the children were written down. Through content analyses; the data obtained from the interviews made with the children were analyzed. Using NVIVO 9.0 software program; coding and themes related to types of children’s parental love perceptions were established. Descriptive data and test of difference of the study were processed with SPSS 22 program. Descriptive data, percentages (%) and frequency (f) values were calculated. To determine the differences between types of children’s parental love perceptions and their gender, ages and parents’ gender; chi-square analyses were used.

## 3. Findings

When the data explored through interviews made with the children were investigated; it was seen that children perceived parental love under six categories: 1. Physical contact with parent, 2. Parental approval words, 3. Spending quality time with parent, 4. Being given presents by parent, 5. Ensuring basic needs of child by parent and 6. Meeting the parental expectation (Figure 1, 2).



**Fig. 1.** Children’s perception types of parental love.

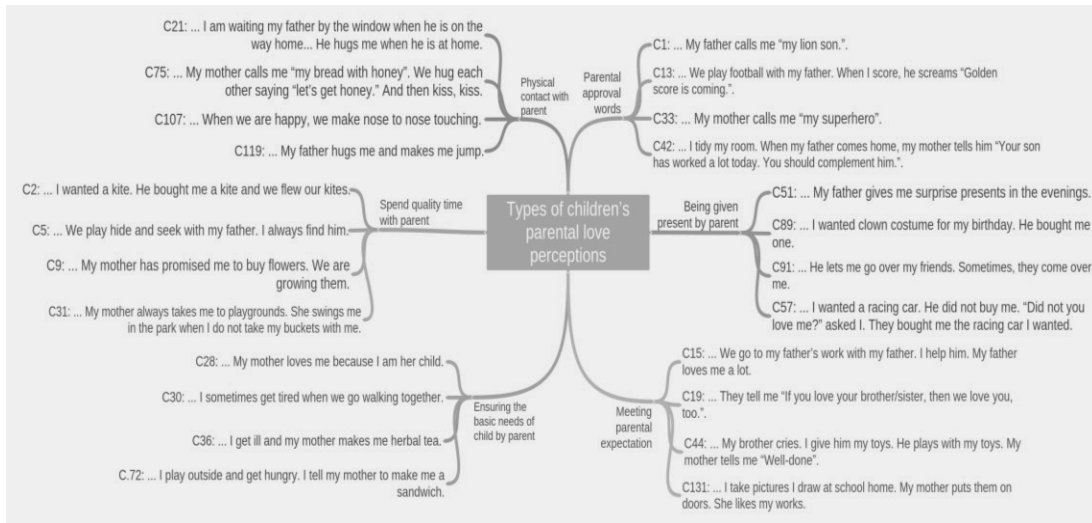


Fig. 2. Children’s expressions examples: Types of children’s parental love perceptions

When types of children’s parental love perceptions were examined, it was found out that physical contact [(49 children (20.4%)), approval words [(33 children (13.8%)] spending quality time with parent [46 children (19.2%)], being given present by parent [45 children (18.8%)], ensuring basic needs [31 children (12.9%)] and meeting parental expectation [36 children (15%)] were considered as an expression of love (Table 1).

Table 1. Children’s perception types of parental love.

Perception Types of Parental Love	f	%
Physical contact with parent	49	20.4
Parental approval words	33	13.8
Spend quality time with parent	46	19.2
Being given present by the parent	45	18.8
Ensuring basic needs of child by parent	31	12.9
Meeting the parental expectation	36	15.0

N=240

Table 2 demonstrated results of chi-square analyses made to determine whether or not children’s parental love perceptions were dependent on gender. In light of these findings; parental love perceived differed significantly in terms of gender ( $X^2=15.299$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Girls perceived physical contact with parents and being given presents by parents as an expression of love whereas boys perceived spend quality time with parents and meeting parental expectation as main two expressions of love.

**Table 2.** Results of chi-square analyses about children's parental love perceptions in terms of gender variable.

Perception types of parental love	Girl		Boy		X <sup>2</sup>	df	p
	f	%	f	%			
Physical contact with parent	32	26.7	17	14.2	15.299	5	.009
Parental approval words	19	15.8	14	11.7			
Spend quality time with parent	15	12.5	31	25.8			
Being given present by the parent	27	22.5	18	15			
Ensuring basic needs of child by parent	13	10.8	18	15			
Meeting the parental expectation	14	11.7	22	18.3			

Table 3 showed results of chi-square analyses conducted to determine whether or not children's parental love perceptions were dependent on their ages. According to these results; parental love perceived did not differ significantly in terms of age (X<sup>2</sup>=10.010, p>.05).

**Table 3.** Results of chi-square analyses about children's parental love perceptions in terms of age variable.

Perception types of parental love	4		5		6		X <sup>2</sup>	df	p
	f	%	f	%	f	%			
Physical contact with parent	17	21.0	16	20.3	16	20.0	10.010	10	.440
Parental approval words	8	9.9	10	12.7	15	18.8			
Spend quality time with parent	16	19.8	11	13.9	19	23.8			
Being given present by the parent	17	21.0	14	17.7	14	17.5			
Ensuring basic needs of child by parent	11	13.6	15	19.0	5	6.3			
Meeting the parental expectation	12	14.8	13	16.5	11	13.8			

Table 4 presented results of chi-square analyses performed to determine whether or not girls' and boys' parental love perceptions were dependent on their parents' gender. The results indicated that parental love perceived by girls and boys changed considerably in terms of parents' gender (X<sup>2</sup>=13.297, p<.05; X<sup>2</sup>=14.169, p<.01). Girls perceived physical contact with mothers as an expression of love while boys perceived spend quality time with mothers as an expression of love in the first place. Girls perceived being given presents by fathers as an expression of love while boys perceived meeting fathers' expectation as an expression of love in the first place.

**Table 4.** Results of chi-square analyses about children's parental love perceptions in terms of parents' gender.

Parent	Perception types of parental love	Girl		Boy		X <sup>2</sup>	df	p
		f	%	f	%			
Mother	Physical contact with parent	17	32.1	8	11.9	13.2975	5	.021
	Parental approval words	7	13.2	8	11.9			
	Spend quality time with parent	5	9.4	21	31.3			
	Being given present by the parent	7	13.2	12	17.9			
	Ensuring basic needs of child by parent	9	17.0	8	11.9			
	Meeting the parental expectation	8	15.1	10	14.9			
Father	Physical contact with parent	15	22.4	9	17.0	14.1695	5	.015
	Parental approval words	12	17.9	6	11.3			
	Spend quality time with parent	10	14.9	10	18.9			
	Being given present by the parent	20	29.9	6	11.3			
	Ensuring basic needs of child by parent	4	6.0	10	18.9			
	Meeting the parental expectation	6	9.0	12	22.6			

Table 5 included results of chi-square analyses made to determine whether or not parental love perceptions of children aged 4-5-6 years were dependent on their parents' gender. Accordingly; the results suggested that parental love perceived by children aged 4-5-6 years did not change significantly in terms of parents' gender ( $X^2=11.743$ ,  $p>.05$ ;  $X^2=8.333$ ,  $p>.05$ ). Children aged 4 years perceived ensuring basic needs of child by mothers, children aged 5 years perceived physical contact with mothers and children aged 6 years perceived being given presents by mothers as an expression of love in the first place. On the other hand; children aged 4 years perceived physical contact with fathers, children aged 5 years perceived being given presents by fathers and children aged 6 years perceived approval words of fathers as an expression of love in the first place.

**Table 5.** Results of chi-square analyses about parental love perceptions of children aged 4-5-6 in terms of children's ages.

Parent	Perception types of parental love	4		5		6		X <sup>2</sup>	df	p
		f	%	f	%	f	%			
Mother	Physical contact with parent	4	12.5	11	26.2	10	21.7	11.743	10	.303
	Parental approval words	3	9.4	5	11.9	7	15.2			
	Spend quality time with parent	6	18.8	6	14.3	14	30.4			
	Being given present by the parent	6	18.8	5	11.9	8	17.4			
	Ensuring basic needs of child by parent	7	21.9	8	19.0	2	4.3			
	Meeting the parental expectation	6	18.8	7	16.7	5	10.9			
Father	Physical contact with parent	13	26.5	5	13.5	6	17.6	8.333	10	.596
	Parental approval words	5	10.2	5	13.5	8	23.5			
	Spend quality time with parent	10	20.4	5	13.5	5	14.7			
	Being given present by the parent	11	22.4	9	24.3	6	17.6			
	Ensuring basic needs of child by parent	4	8.2	7	18.9	3	8.8			
	Meeting the parental expectation	6	12.2	6	16.2	6	17.6			

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

In the current study; how children aged 4-6 years made sense the way their parents loved them was studied and perceived parental love expressions were described. It was examined whether or not types of perceptions of parental love demonstrated differed in terms of gender, ages of children and gender of parents.

Children build up personal standards by observing the feedbacks given to themselves and others during their relations with parents. Thus; children learn a lot about themselves and others (Bandura, 1992 & 2001). During the early years; children use emotional clues of parents as social references (Moses et al., 2001; Mumme et al., 2007; Mumme et al., 1996; Repacholi & Gopnik, 1997; Stenberg, 2003; Stenberg & Campos, 1990; Stenberg et al., 1983; Striano & Rochat, 2000; Vaish & Striano, 2004). As they experience, children notice that their emotional reactions may change and learn how to comment on emotions in time, to express them as desired and to control these emotions (Martin et al., 2008; Saarni, 1999 & 2000; Saarni et al., 2007). During this process; it is a natural outcome that emotional expressions similar to those in adults may emerge (Gergely et al., 2002; Gergely & Watson, 1996 & 1999; Zmyj et al., 2009). Therefore; love shows up as a complex fact learnt by experience. According to study findings; children perceived parental love under six categories:

Physical contact with parent: Parent's kissing, hugging, lapping.

Parental approval words: Parent's use of such love statements as well-done, good boy/girl.

Spend quality time with parent: Enjoyable free time activities done with parents and children together (painting, dancing, watching films, etc.).

Being given presents by parent: Parent's buying toys, chocolates, clothes, etc.

Ensuring basic needs of child by parent: Parents' being sensitive to basic needs of child (preparing foods when children are hungry, taking children to doctors when they are ill, hugging them when they are scared, fondling children when they cannot sleep, etc).

Meeting parental expectation: Such situations as children's putting toys away, getting along well with sister/brother, helping housework, keeping quiet.

When all these six categories were analyzed in terms of children's gender, ages and gender of parents;

It was seen that parental love perceived by children aged 4-6 years differed significantly in terms of children's gender and parents' gender. Girls perceived physical contact with parents and being given presents by parents as an expression of love while boys perceived spending quality time with parents and meeting parental expectation as main two expressions of love. Again; girls perceived physical contact with mothers and being given presents by fathers as an expression of love. Boys perceived spending quality time with mothers and meeting fathers' expectation as an expression of love in the first place. Actually; it is known those parents' upbringing styles, their child-raising

attitudes, social norms, cultural values, expectations about behaviors, value of the children in society, socio-economical differences, etc. result in differences in parent-child relation (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1981; Kolhatkar & Berkowitz, 2014; Şanlı & Öztürk, 2015). Therefore; it is a possible outcome that parents exhibit different love expressions according to their gender and children's gender (Hallers-Haalboom et al., 2016). Ability to assess others' behaviors considering their emotions is a mental ability (Wellman et al., 2000; Watson et al., 1998; Bartsch & Estes, 1996). As stated by Berman et al. (2016); preschool children show the ability to comment on verbal and facial emotional expressions. This ability (Theory of Mind) is acquired by normally growing children towards the age of 4 (Wimmer and Perner, 1983). Children are able to get mental conclusions about emotions that produce actions from the age of four averagely (Kårstad et al., 2015). Children aged five years are quite competent in deducing emotional clues from verbal signals (Sauter et al., 2013). Children aged seven years can make predictions about how future outcomes of actions will affect emotions (Lagattuta, 2005). The study findings suggested that parental love perceived by children aged 4-6 years did not change significantly in terms of children's ages and parents' gender. However; all the age groups perceived physical contact with parents as an expression of parental love in the first place. In terms of parents' gender; children aged 4 years perceived ensuring basic needs of child by mothers, children aged 5 years perceived physical contact with mothers and children aged 6 years perceived being given presents by mothers as an expression of love in the first place. Again; children aged 4 years perceived physical contact with fathers, children aged 5 years perceived being given by fathers and children aged 6 years perceived approval words of fathers as an expression of love in the first place. Actually; as far as the current study was concerned, it was found out that expressions and statements about parental love as perceived by the participant children aged 4-6 years did not change significantly. According to the literature; this is a possible finding because children at these ages can understand relation among beliefs, wishes, actions and emotions however they cannot make predictions about how future outcomes of actions will affect emotions (Atance, 2010; Bonoti & Misalidi, 2015; Çelik et al., 2002; Gross & Ballif, 1991; Lagattuta, 2005; Mayer et al., 2001; Sprung et al., 2015; Wellman and Lagattuta, 2000).

Many ways are possible to express and demonstrate love. Children can perceive love expressions from early ages. In this sense, it becomes important issues how children make sense of these love expressions and statements and how love is transferred to children. The current study drew attention to types of parental love perceived by children aged 4-6 years. When it is taken into consideration that a healthy parent-child relation may affect individuals' lifelong relations from early childhood years; we are of the opinion that the study findings will make important contributions to literature. Yet, types of love expressions may vary according to cultures. Therefore; the study can be replicated with different samples (for example; Asian children, American children). Besides, the study was undertaken with children aged 4-6 years. The study can be repeated with elder or younger children (children over 7 years, adolescents, etc.) to find out whether or not there is a distinguishing effect of age upon perceived parental love. Again, it can be studied whether or not such influential variables upon parent-child relation as parental authority, parental roles, self-concept about parental roles play a role in children's perceiving parental love.



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