

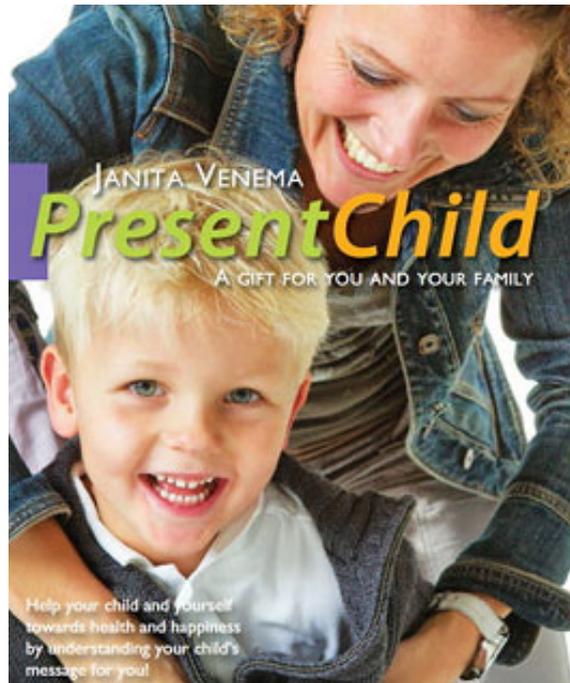
Janita Venema Present Child

Reading excerpt

[Present Child](#)

of [Janita Venema](#)

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Love or fear?

You see it in the children's eyes
within it they reflect the love we forget.

FUN LOVING CRIMINALS

All you need is love.

BEATLES

If you are in search of a happy, healthy family atmosphere, then love is the one and only requirement. However, it can be difficult trying to live from a position of love, if love is what you lacked. The concept of love is difficult to describe because it is so diverse and all encompassing, but I am going to make an attempt.

Love makes connections from the heart, openly and unconditionally. Love is open and willing to learn. Love understands someone else's perspective, whilst maintaining self-respect. Love means giving and taking the space each of us needs. Love makes time and pays attention, but can also let go. Love can also be expressed in deeds: a comforting arm, a helping hand crossing the road, reading aloud or running through a field of dandelion seed heads together. Love can take on many different forms. The love you give a baby is different from that given to a toddler or a teenager...

Sometimes love can also involve setting boundaries, making yourself understood and teaching your children about some of the restriction of this world and how to deal with them. These restrictions are not always pleasant... but children will have to deal with them sooner or later. Love can mean ignoring or punishing certain behaviour in your child. Love can involve making your child resilient and warning them about dangers. Love may be giving your children chores to do (mowing the lawn, cooking, grocery shopping) so that they learn to take responsibility. Handing a task over to them, means you will have more time to do things together and, in addition, you will be able to compliment them when they have carried out the task well. This, in turn, affords them the opportunity to feel proud of themselves, even though they may not always have enjoyed the tasks...

Fun, nice, loving or harmonious are not by definition synonymous with love. That is what makes it so confusing. Love can sometimes be tough. Children, too, may show their parents something in a way that is tough and confrontational. They do this out of love, simply because it is necessary and because the same message given in a more friendly way is not getting through. The reverse is true too, with parents sometimes having to set clear boundaries in the interests of their child's development. In general, children are open to taking direction from us, but whether the reverse is also true, is

questionable. If giving your child direction requires you to invest a disproportionate amount of energy, then you would be wise to ask yourself whether you are listening carefully enough to the instructions your child is giving you! It is very likely that your child is persevering with a certain type of behaviour out of love for you, in an attempt to open your eyes to something important.

Many things, done in the name of love, do not deserve to bear the name; for example, always being nice and obliging or never being allowed to argue or show anger. Some parents sacrifice themselves for their children, trying to give them everything they themselves never had. While this may appear noble, it is only half the story. You may be thinking; I do not sacrifice myself, I have a life outside of my family. Perhaps you work yourself to a standstill in order to afford brand name clothing and beautiful things for your children so that they will not feel like outcasts or be teased the way you were as a child. This sacrifice is made with good intentions but is based on old pain. There is no need to protect your children from whatever happened to you. The only meaningful contribution you can make is to heal your old pain. Your children will most certainly feel this, both unconsciously as well as through your daily dealings with each other.

All things considered, it is not about *what you* do but what your *motives* are for doing them. One parent may consciously choose to stay home with the children and do so with pleasure; another will see this as a sacrifice: 'My parents were never there for us, so I will make sure I am always there for them.' One parent may work because they would be ashamed to admit to being 'merely a housewife or -husband', whereas another may work with a diligence that originates in 'not being heard' in their youth, yet a third will work because working makes them happy. Some parents may say; 'I am not a very caring type; "mothering" is not in my nature'. This could, however, be based on events that took place in your earliest youth and does not mean that you are incapable of becoming caring. Bearing this in mind, always examine your underlying motives meticulously.

Setting boundaries and stating things clearly can emanate from love, but also from impotence or habit. Many boundaries are set unconsciously, simply because everyone does so. Parents send children to their room at the drop of a hat because they have no idea how to deal with their behaviour. There are parents who expect a three year old to be able to sit still and amuse himself for hours when visitors arrive. Some parents do not tolerate arguments, nipping any potential disagreements in the bud immediately. Parents may become irritated when their children daydream: 'Go and do something, stop loafing about!' In contrast, other boundaries that would benefit children are disregarded either out of convenience, habit, because that is the way it has always been done, because everyone does it that way or because it is trendy. The television is

turned on first thing in the morning, a DVD after school, computer time in the evening and even a little MTV in bed on their own TV. Although you may be keeping your child quiet in this way, you should ask yourself if you are doing so out of love or convenience. Convenience could be a cover for fear: 'What in heavens name would I do with my child otherwise? I have absolutely no idea!' Here are a few more examples of boundaries that are disregarded: nowadays it would appear one has the right to say, do and have absolutely everything. It would appear that personal freedom may not be encroached upon, even in the slightest way. Therefore, if a child thinks his teacher is a bastard, he should be allowed to express that opinion freely. If he feels like consuming three bars of chocolate, three cans of coca-cola and a hamburger everyday, that is up to him. Is there anyone who still eats a plain sandwich? There are children who (are allowed to) spend a fortune on their mobile phone because that is what everyone does. Parents, by the way, are often the ones setting a bad example. It is becoming commonplace to own a watch that costs ten thousand euros or to buy an extra patio kitchen simply because you 'have the money'. We think this will make us happier when in reality this consumerism indicates that we are in need of something more within ourselves (inner riches) in order to be happy. Our attitude towards money, instead of being a paragon of love, is testimony to our fear of deprivation or exclusion. This is in stark contrast to the many millions of people who survive on less than a dollar a day, and to the death of vast numbers of children just a continent away. A child dies every three seconds in Africa¹¹. How many micro credits¹² could you issue for the same amount of money? Would you then be happy with what you achieved with your money?

Ideally, personal freedom should be accompanied by the simultaneous development of inherent boundaries and responsibility. Children learn these through their upbringing. Are they treated with respect? Do they receive love and attention? Is showing mutual consideration for one another the norm? Personal freedom should encompass perceptiveness, empathy and common sense but, alas, it is often characterised by the lunacy of our time; egotism, gut feelings and short-sighted ideas. In short, love is a vast concept. It is not what you do, but the underlying motive for doing so that determines whether or not it is love. Every imaginable (educational) deed can be done either out of love or out of fear. Whenever you have doubts about a specific question relating to raising your child or to your own life, ask yourself the following question:

'Am I doing this - in this way -out of love or fear?'

Listen carefully to the answer that comes to you in all sincerity.

This is a good start.

A child who spends a fortune on mobile telephone calls may be allowed to do so out of fear that he will not belong otherwise. However, he could also be a child at boarding

school who needs to hear his parents' voices regularly. That is how they stay in touch and is therefore an act of love. If you are forced to admit that you are doing something out of fear or in order to master an underlying fear, then ideally, this should lead towards the initiation of change. Even when immediate action is not possible, the very awareness that change is necessary is a step in the right direction. Merely taking this step can make a difference because it will make itself felt through the mutual understanding between parents and children.

This book contains very little concrete educational advice, since it is the motive behind an action that determines whether or not it contributes towards a healthy environment, and this can vary greatly from individual to individual. I cannot tell you to do things in a certain way that will make everything better. I merely hope to offer a way forward that everyone can follow in his or her own way. Even then, there is no guarantee that everything will go smoothly which, by the way, is not the aim either. The aim is development and growth in a loving atmosphere. Love is the central theme, in child rearing, in developing yourself, in the PresentChild concept, in life as a whole; however, it should now be clear that love has many aspects...

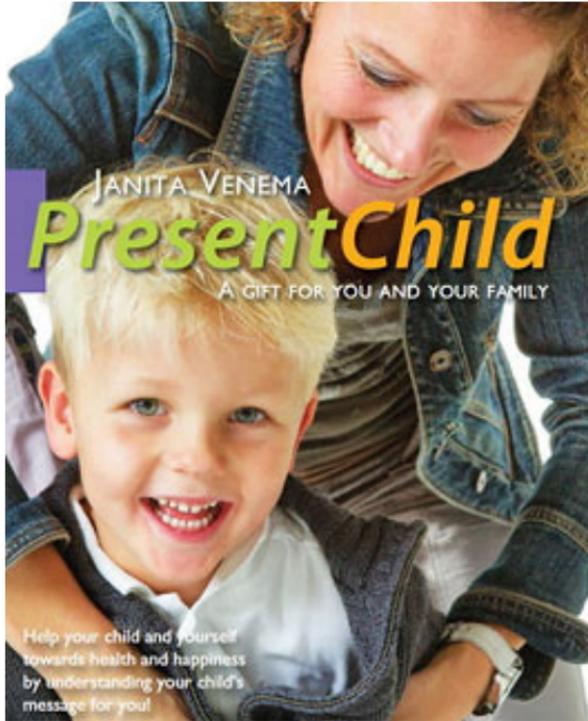
One difficult aspect of love is that, as a concept, it is huge and abstract. A child may ask for love thereby presenting his parents with the message that they need to love themselves more. What, though, should you as a parent actually do with this information? The concept of love needs form and content if you are to do anything with it. Fortunately, children do not leave us to our own devices, but present us with detailed instructions showing us the way in which the concept of love should be allowed to take shape. We need only pay careful attention to what our children present us with and take action accordingly. Here are two examples:

Meg is a self-willed toddler who is plagued by excessive mucous production. Her nose is permanently blocked because of this. In addition, she regularly has high peaks of fever. 'She is quite susceptible', her mother tells me, 'and sleeps restlessly. Meg often has bad dreams about ghosts and spectres. She wakes up and calls me to chase them away.' I ask Meg's mother if she recognizes the sensation of fullness. 'Choc-a-block', she answers without hesitation, 'full of nice things mind you.' She is active in the community, takes all sorts of courses and lectures on child rearing and reads everything on the subject she can lay her hands on. She speaks passionately and enthusiastically about her activities and the insights she gains from them. The silly thing though is that I am always feverishly busy doing all these things', she says, 'I lose myself in them.' She feels that this has helped her to make her a better mother. In the meantime, as she chases after the image of a perfect mother, her time and her life are slipping through her fingers. As a health worker, I might be impressed by how consciously she immerses herself

in motherhood, but Meg has other ideas. She presents her mother with the following message: Your life is too full; you are too feverishly busy. Do things in your own way. You are too susceptible to anything that comes your way. Chase away your dreadful image, your phantom, the one of you as a 'not good enough mother' because it is nothing more than a bad dream. Through her symptoms, she is telling her mother to let go of everything, to come and sit beside her and be her mother instead of constantly trying to be an even better one. That is all she needs. Her mother understands immediately and scraps all sorts of activities. Meg's bouts of fever disappear within days, and stay away. In this case, love is about clearing your diary and spending more time with your child.

In the story about Ben, the boy with passive bowels and his mother, who had become completely passive as a result of a terrible youth (see pg. 47), the message is: get moving, get away from your past by becoming active.

Love can mean so many different things. Your heart, however, knows how to determine whether something is, in fact, love or not. In essence, children long for one thing only: to be viewed through loving eyes by the people they love dearly. However, in order to get what they long for, children may first have to teach their parents about love.



Janita Venema

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