

Will Unconditional Love Spoil Your Child

Maybe. Unconditional love is the number-one controversy which means it's up to parents to determine the right do

MY LOVE FOR ZOE AND ROBIN HAS A physical, tangible quality that grounds me. Their existence makes me feel connected to my mate, to the rest of the world, to the past and the future; it has nothing to do with who they are or what they do. This feeling hit me like a ton of bricks the minute I saw Zoe and has never gone away. It's with me all the time, like some secret good news."

These sentiments came to me last night by fax, a midnight gift from a Philadelphia friend. I had another opener ready, but I pressed the delete button on my computer and sent it reeling into oblivion. Unconditional love ought to be this simple, this instinctual, I thought—a present bestowed at birth, with no dangerous pieces to swallow. Quite the opposite is often true.

Today, child development experts are divided into three camps: First, there are the true believers, who view unconditional

love as key to the development of a healthy personality; second, the skeptics, who think that unconditional love is an idealistic concept that puts parents in a straitjacket; and third, the naysayers, who perceive unconditional love as a hindrance to discipline and a menace to the development of responsibility and self-esteem.

Such disagreement spurs a set of jarring questions—not the least of which is whether the combination of the two words “unconditional” and “love” produces an

oxymoron. Do kids need unconditional love to have a sense of security and belonging? What, exactly, is the difference between unconditional love and leniency? What happens to kids whose parents offer too much of the “wrong” kind of love?

In the Beginning

The debate over unconditional love is not new. Consider the query attributed to Confucius, “Can there be love which does not make demands on its object?” Consider Jesus Christ, the embodiment of love and acceptance. The term unconditional love arrived in the popular lexicon in 1956 by the pen of psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, Ph.D., who authored *The Art of Loving*, a slim volume that sold abundantly, perhaps because its title offered promise of sexual enlightenment. “Unconditional love corresponds to one of the deepest longings, not only of the child, but of every human being,” Dr. Fromm wrote. From his perspective, the mother was the source of unconditional love; the father’s role was to provide a more critical and moral perspective.

“After World War II,” notes Ron Taffel, Ph.D., New York City psychologist and *Some parents' and kids' names have been changed.*

Question: Parental Love

by Cathryn Jakobson Ramin

among childrearing experts today, of discipline and affection. Here's how.

author of *Parenting by Heart*, "everybody was on the couch, talking about deficient mothers and childhoods. Mothers were released from their war jobs and sent back to the kitchen. There was an incredible emphasis on childrearing, and the Mother's role was to provide the optimum amount of unconditional positive regard."

A great many mothers leapt at the

chance, determined not to follow their parents' stiff, authoritarian method of raising children. In the late Fifties and early Sixties, a generation of parents erupted who wanted to provide unconditional love but who were unsure of the means. Some children were imbued at birth: "I had it as a child," says Norma May-Isakow, an attorney and Denver mother of two girls. "And I think it

had—and still has—a huge, positive effect on my self-esteem and confidence."

For other baby boomers, the message was never received. Various 40-year-olds are sitting in therapists' offices, discussing parents who paid off performance with affection but had little love to spare in difficult times. According to Chicago psychotherapist Laurie Ashner, author of *When Parents Love Too Much*, "the most powerful and destructive tool for shaping a child's behavior lies in the withdrawal of love. A child will do anything to avoid this, even compromise who he is. He will learn he has to perform to be loved."

Sometimes the consequences of performance-based love are long-term and troublesome. "I have no sense of a safety net," says Linda Swan, a screenwriter with a 2-year-old daughter whose parents' love was achingly conditional. When she divorced, her father refused to give her advice. "He said I was on my own," recalls Swan. "I have no sense of security. If the bottom fell out for me, I wouldn't have a haven."

With her daughter, Lindy, Swan seeks a comfortable equilibrium: "To me, unconditional love is getting the sense from your parent that 'I care about you, every part of you. You (Continued on page 150)

How Healthy Is Your Love?

Finding the best balance between unconditional love and appropriate limits can be more than a little tricky. Test your affection perceptions with this quiz, prepared with assistance from Ashner. The answers are on page 150.

1 Your 2-year-old is sitting on the floor with a simple puzzle. She begins to shriek in frustration. You: a) move her to another activity; b) put one starter piece in and offer words of encouragement; c) sit down and show her how it's done.

2 You discover that your 3-year-old has gone to town with her crayons, using her bedroom wall as a canvas. You: a) tell her you're furious, put her in her room, set the timer, and close the door; b) tell her that it is wrong to draw on the walls and get out the cleaning supplies and two pairs of rubber gloves; c) clean it up yourself, but tell her you won't let her use her crayons until she learns to act better.

3 You look up while at the playground, and your three-foot-tall kid is 15 feet off the ground, at the top of the world's tallest slide. You: a) shout for her to come down immediately because she might get hurt; b) climb to the top yourself and supervise the descent; c) watch from your bench and pray.

4 Your 6-year-old is taking gymnastics classes. All the other kids enthusiastically perform skin the cat. Your child won't move. You: a) say, "Jeffrey..." in a tone that promises trouble; b) offer a tight, suffering smile to the other parents and say nothing; c) ask him later how he's feeling about gym class.

5 Your 8-year-old announces after supper that he's all set to begin his report on Daniel Boone—and that it's due tomorrow. You: a) lecture him about the importance of planning ahead; b) speed-read the encyclopedia and spoon-feed the information to him; c) tell him that he has three hours to get it done before bedtime, then drop the subject.

6 Your 12-year-old daughter wants to go to a party where you suspect there will be alcohol. You: a) tell her that you will speak to the hostess's parents before you decide—and do it; b) sit home and worry all evening; c) show up at 9:30, pretending that you thought it was time to pick her up.

are who you are, and I will do my best to try not to control who you become. If you get in trouble, I will try to support you even without approval of your actions.”

Too Much of a Good Thing?

Sadly, these same parents who came up short as children often bend over backward to offer more and better love. According to Dr. Taffel, such obsessive affection may be turning parents into machines. “The kids who are most out of control are the ones whose parents use an overly patient, unflappable tone of voice,” Dr. Taffel says. “Kids can’t stand it. We need to let them know the effects of their actions on us. Children are more empathetic than we realize.”

For example, crooning, “Now, honey, you know we don’t write on the walls with Mommy’s lipstick,” de-emphasizes your dismay—and the inappropriateness of the child’s behavior. By saying instead, “It really upsets me when you write on the walls with lipstick. It’s very hard to clean off. You’re going to have to help,” the child hears that his actions have created a problem, and he feels the natural consequences of having to correct the situation.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has documented the outcome of this obsessive affection, identifying it as “The Spoiled Child Syndrome.” Says Ashner, “A parent who loves gives time, attention, and affection and takes care of the child’s emotional and physical needs. A parent who loves too much sees the child as an extension of himself. He wants to give the child everything, even before he asks for it.”

Some purporters of the current self-esteem movement would also have us believe that, as a matter of course, large doses of love and praise bring about high levels of self-esteem. The opposite is frequently true, says Dr. Taffel: “People interpret building self-esteem to mean that parents can never get mad and that they need to praise abundantly and nurture their kids at all times. The result is that we have turned kids into praise junkies.” As adults, these children face a

sense of emptiness: What happened to that constantly admiring shadow?

A laundry list of undesirable personality traits is the result of the wrong kind of love, concludes Ashner. Such children get a “mixed message, with mixed results.” They learn to feel special and deserving of attention, but they can’t identify and ask for what they need. They learn to take direction from others, but they don’t trust their own initiative. They learn to manipulate people for attention, but they don’t know how to give clear, direct messages.

As any parent knows, the difference between indulgence and love is never crystal clear, especially in the heat of the moment. Just ask Louise Aaron, mother of 4-year-old Jeremy: “He wanted a baseball bat—another one—and I refused. For the first time, he let fly with, ‘If you loved me, you’d buy it.’ I almost paid for it, I was so taken aback,” she says. “I’d been working all day, and I felt like he deserved a treat.”

Did Aaron take the bait—and inadvertently send her child the message that a special treat equals special love? “Feeling like I was heading into the eye of a hurricane, I turned him down,” she explains. “It wasn’t pretty, but we got through, and it taught me something: I wasn’t going to let him think he could buy my love—or lose it, either. What I said to myself is, ‘I love this child enough not to give in.’”

Angst Over Anger

The goal,” writes parent educator Nancy Samalin in *Love and Anger: The Parental Dilemma*, “is not to eliminate the feelings of anger from our repertoire. We couldn’t, even if we wanted

to. Rather, it is to find ways to express ourselves when we are angry that do not hurt, insult, demean, or inspire revenge and rage in our children.”

Children and parents need to realize that love and anger are not opposites. Anger is inevitable, and often justified. “We don’t always feel loving, and that’s okay,” continues Samalin. “Children don’t always feel loving toward us, either. It’s helpful to let a child know, when she has deliberately misbehaved or defied us, that we are not feeling very loving at the moment.”

In an allusion to the *The Wizard of Oz*, Manhattan psychotherapist JoAnn Magdoff says, “Don’t criticize yourself for not being Glenda the Good—benign, loving, always available. You’re human, she’s not. It’s unconditionally loving to recognize your own limitations and not berate yourself.”

Fortunately, even misplaced love can usually be recovered after a cool-down period. “When I’m really angry, I find that an inner part of me probes my soul,” says Cindy Albert Link, New Haven, Connecticut, mother of three, “seeking reassurance that I *do* still love them, despite my fury.”

Modern Love

If there is a childrearing edict for the Nineties, it is this: *Reject the unacceptable behavior without rejecting the child.* “That’s my definition of unconditional love,” says Davis, California, psychologist Robert Mac Kenzie, Ed.D., author of *Setting Limits*. “It says, ‘I love you. I accept you. And I will show you as best I can an acceptable way to behave.’”

Real love helps the child move on to the next stage of (*Continued on page 157*)

ANSWERS TO QUIZ:

- 1 (b) *By helping just a little and offering words of encouragement—but not taking over—you are encouraging independence and a strong sense of self-worth.*
- 2 (b) *By enlisting her aid, you are letting your child know that her actions have legitimate, predictable consequences and she experiences the difficulty of correcting her error.*
- 3 (b) *If you climb to the top and help your child do it herself, you are showing her that you approve of her spunk and want her to be independent, but that your job is to help her to recognize dangers.*
- 4 (c) *By asking him how he’s feeling, away from class, you give your child a chance to express himself without calling him a failure, suggesting that he embarrassed you, or making it into a big issue.*
- 5 (c) *By keeping the book report strictly in his court, you are showing your child that it is his job—not yours. You teach him that you will not blame or shame him, but you will not mop up after him, either.*
- 6 (a) *When you inform your daughter that you will speak to the hostess’s parents before she attends, you are demonstrating that it is your job to care for her safety. You show that you are forthright in your concerns and do not play tricks or games—and expect the same from her.*

development. “That love and discipline can exist together is one of the first double messages a child receives: ‘Who I am’ vs. ‘what I do,’” emphasizes Eleanor S. Szanton, Ph.D., executive director of Zero to Three/National Center for Clinical Infant Programs in Arlington, Virginia. “Parents who can’t deliver this message successfully often end up with children who are unable to set limits for themselves.”

Properly used, unconditional love can further the cause. According to Manhattan psychoanalyst Nancy Kaufman, C.S.W., “Good discipline is one of the finest forms of love. Children need boundaries in order to feel safe. When a child is out of control and no one helps him regain it, what he feels mostly is frightened and abandoned.”

Parents often mistake indulgence for love and raise children who are unprepared for the fact that not everybody worships the ground they walk on. In the name of love, parents shy away from discipline—and call it quality time. “There are some working parents who mistakenly leave the discipline function to the caretaker,” says Kaufman. “They think they are doing their children a service by just ‘enjoying’ them when they come home from work. But the message the kids get is that the parents don’t care.”

Diana Baumrind, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the University of California, agrees. “The parent who expresses love unconditionally is encouraging the child to be selfish and demanding, while she herself is not. Thus, she reinforces exactly the behavior she does not approve of—greedy, inconsiderate, demanding behavior,” she explains. “For his part, the child is likely to feel morally inferior for what he is and to experience conflict about what he should become.”

Dr. Baumrind suggests that the concept of unconditional love be replaced with the idea of unconditional commitment. “That means,” she says, “that the child’s interests are perceived as among the parents’ most important interests, and no matter what a child does, the parent does not desert the child. But the love of a parent for a child must be demanding. The parent has the right—indeed, the duty—to expect obedi-

unconditional love? Most child development experts recommend the familiar time-out, but there is diversity both in methods and philosophical underpinnings. Rare is the parent who hasn’t tried some form of banishment. “There must be no withdrawal of love involved. Only a withholding of the good stuff,” Dr. Mac Kenzie notes. “If time-out is done matter-of-factly and firmly, with no threats, no hours of cajoling, etc., it won’t be injurious. It is the manipulative, threatening dance that does the damage.”

When You Do It Right

There are signs that a parent has found a recipe for love that makes for security, confidence, and competence. They are obvious from the time the child can express himself: a joy in achievement that has little to do with parental approval; an innate generosity with other children, born of the feeling that there’s enough of everything to go around; an understanding that love is not a weapon and that manipulation won’t work; and developing empathy, the sense that other people’s feelings matter as much as his own.

Perhaps the ultimate evidence of success is described by Dr. Fromm. “Between the ages of 8 and 10,” he wrote, “for the first time in the child’s life, the idea of love is transformed from being loved into loving, into creating love. The child has overcome his egocentricity; the other person is not any more primarily a means to the satisfaction of his own needs. The needs of the other person are as important.”

It takes time. In that same midnight fax from Philadelphia, my friend wrote this: “Robin, who is 4, is currently going through a phase where, when she gets angry at me, she says, ‘I hate you, Mommy.’ So the other day, trying to be the ‘modern parent,’ I said to her, ‘Robin, I don’t think that’s what you mean to say. I think you’re really angry at something I’ve done, and you could say, ‘I’m really angry at you, Mommy.’ But I don’t think you hate me, because I love you, even when I’m angry at something you’ve done.”

“Robin thought about it a minute, then looked at me and said, ‘No, Mommy, that’s not what I mean. I mean I hate you.’”