

## Unconditional Love

Have you ever had the frightening experience of questioning your feelings for your children? You love them, of course; you looked forward, with great excitement, to their arrival as babies into your household and now, some years down the track, they have grown into children with minds, manners and behaviours all their own. Sometimes, when feeling exhausted, stretched and overwhelmed, and your child's behaviour is challenging and relentless, it can be a struggle to feel those good, loving thoughts.

This is living in the world of normal parenting. It is easy to love our children when they are being good but harder when they are driving us crazy. Yet, we believe there is not one amongst us who would not walk in front of a moving bus to save them.

The secret is to remember that love is not just a feeling. It is a way of being and behaving. Love is described beautifully by St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. He says, among other things, that love is patient and kind, slow so anger, and keeps no record of wrongs. It protects, hopes and perseveres. Love never ends (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). We have children so we can love and nurture them and as parents; it is our job to teach them. They do not and should not have to do anything to earn our love. Your love is non-negotiable and should never be used, given or withdrawn as reward or punishment. Our children need to know that our love for them is rock solid no matter what they may do or say.

But it isn't always easy. How do we continue to show our child that they are well-loved when we are disappointed, hurt, frightened or angered by their behaviour? It can be very difficult to stop your anger and frustration from flowing into your reaction when your child has done something disrespectful, hurtful or, worse, dangerous. This is the challenge. We need to keep our children safe, so it is not OK for them to be hitting or throwing rocks at each other. We want to teach our children to be respectful, so it is not OK for them to swear and shout at you. We want them to be obedient and resourceful, so it's not OK for them to refuse to do as you ask, or take responsibility for their actions. But discipline is more likely to be effective and change more likely to come when we act from a place of love rather than a place of anger.

It is when children are being most difficult that we must actively remind ourselves to parent this way. It's OK and necessary to challenge and correct bad behaviour. But it is also your child's intrinsic need to know that he/she is loved and accepted even when they have done the wrong thing.

Be very clear about your expectations. Give your children age-appropriate responsibilities around the house. This not only teaches them good habits and helps them to feel connected, but provides you with the opportunity to commend them for their efforts and contributions to family life.

Be very clear about boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and clear about consequences for non-compliance, consequences that don't rely on physical punishment or withdrawal of your love. If you need to step in when bad behaviour is occurring, try speaking your love first: 'Hey, I love you two, but what is going on in here? It has to stop!' Whenever humanly possible, give your children the opportunity to speak and be heard. A child that feels listened to is much more likely to accept responsibility for their own role in what has happened and is more likely to calm down and be more compliant. We have written often about emotion coaching and this is a very useful tool when tempers have flared or emotions are high.

Finally, don't despair. Maybe we have presented a new way of doing things. Perhaps you are relying heavily for guidance on the way you were parented, or have slipped into this

mode for want of a better one. Maybe you are just more cranky than compassionate. Forgive yourself for not being perfect. And who's perfect anyway? We're not looking for perfection in you or your children, just forgiveness and unconditional love.

P.S – Look after and nurture yourself and your own relationships. It is much easier to parent from a place of love when we feel loved and nurtured ourselves.

We really like this quote from Heather Forbes:

'Unconditional love is love without requiring anything in return—love no matter what. Love never fails.'

Further reading

The following websites were referenced in the preparation of this article:

[http://www.ahaparenting.com/blog/Healing\\_Your\\_Ability\\_to\\_Love](http://www.ahaparenting.com/blog/Healing_Your_Ability_to_Love)

<http://www.piccolouniverse.com/en/3-ways-you-can-show-unconditional-love-to-your-kids/>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/peaceful-parents-happy-kids/201403/5-secrets-love-your-child-unconditionally>

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