

'It is past 9:30 pm, I have a quiet home all to myself. I enter into my world of dishes, laundry and trash cans that gets every bit of my attention. It is not over yet- then comes picking up those strewn toys, pieces of the many make-believe play things from the garden, the broken crayons and the scrawny drawings. An hour and a half has passed. Then, with a sigh of relief and a sense of accomplishment of having finished my day, I take the last gaze for the night into my kids' bedroom. There they are asleep, innocence written large on their faces. I take a closer look and find that my heart tugs stronger every night when I realize that yet another day has crept by... unawares.'

'Questions rush through: What did I do to invest in their lives today? How much have I done for them? Was I so busy in getting my day organized that I overlooked what they wanted to say or do? Did they sleep the night with some good memories they can cherish'? Did I tell them today that I love them?'

Parents often seem puzzled about the best way to raise their children. With the mounting issues that face families in this information loaded generation, it gets more confusing. Broken family structures, high divorce rates, diminished moral standards, economic struggles and demands to make ends meet, all bring about implications. A parent becomes largely affected by these situations that it becomes difficult to nurture the child. It takes a conscientious parent to know and understand what the child's needs are. Parenting is hard work and your hard work will pay off in time if you are careful to keep in mind the indispensable key to parenting. So what is that key?

The key is LOVE... unconditional love!

So, as a parent, isn't it obvious that you would intuitively love your child? Isn't love within the heart of every parent? The answer is an emphatic 'YES'. Then, why this emphasis, if love is instinctive and innate? Here comes the big question- does your child feel loved? Does all that you do convey unconditional love to your child? You may be ensuring that all your child's physical needs are met, rectify every unwanted behavior or action with correctional discipline or even getting all that your child wishes/demands for, with the impression that this all conveys love. But does it? Communicating love goes beyond all this. In order for a child to grow to be a responsible, giving and loving adult, he/ she needs to know that they are secure and surrounded by love that is limitless. So what then is unconditional love?

Unconditional love is a love that has no strings attached. It has no conditions to abide by- it is freely available and never hindered because of unpleasant behavior or action. It is a love that communicates to the child, "I love you no matter what." Love is the foundation to a secure and solid relationship with a child.

Children thrive on love

There is so much truth in the saying, “A baby is born with a need to be loved - and never outgrows it.” Like every adult, a child’s lifeblood is love. A child’s greatest fear is to be unloved and abandoned by his/ her parents. (Ginott, 1965) Every child needs to feel that he/she is secure and is cared for by someone who is bigger and in control. (Segal & Simkins, 1993). The renowned psychologist of the 20th century, Abraham Maslow, in his *Theory of Hierarchy of Needs* establishes that the fulfillment of needs such as love and belonging is essential for a child to reach his / her highest potential. A deficiency in these needs can handicap a child and make him/her incompetent to lead a fulfilling adult life.

How should parents show unconditional love?

“It must be my fault that my parents don't love each other anymore.”- A child whose parents quarrel often.

The first place a child learns about love is at home. The interaction between the members of the family, especially the parents determines how a child perceives virtues such as love, compassion and kindness. The foremost way to express love to a child is by expressing genuine love for the spouse. Strong and healthy parental relationships makes a child secure and is like a safety net for his/her life ahead. Parents can love each other by showing mutual respect in the way they talk to each other, by settling their differences away from the children, by supporting each other during times of trouble and by being forgiving.

“I know my mum loves me because she hugs me every morning”- Seven year old child

‘Physical touch is love’s strongest voice,’ Gary Chapman says in his book, *The Five Love Languages of Children*. Babies who are hugged and cuddled develop a more balanced emotional life than those who are left for long periods without physical contact. This is equally true of older children, although the kind of physical touch would be different at different age groups. Younger children need kisses and hugs whereas older children look for other forms of touch such as a high five or a hand wrestle, hair ruffles or a pat on the back. Being physically demonstrative is an important way for children to know they are loved. Research proves that an average person needs 8 to 10 touches per day to thrive emotionally. As a parent, it may be unnatural for you to show physical affection but the truth is that children need to be touched to feel loved.

“My father encourages me to try new things and reminds me that if it doesn’t work out, it’s not the end of the world.”- A teenager

It troubles parents to see their children fail. But the truth is that children experiment with things and situations all the time and fail. The parents’ response to a child’s failure determines the way the child perceives his/ her own sense of worth and competence. Giving the children room to make mistakes teaches them life lessons on perseverance and a willingness to confront challenges. Letting

the child know that it is ok to make mistakes speaks volumes of the trust the parent has in the ability of the child to resolve his / her own problems. As it is written, “love covers a multitude of wrongs”, the parent that seeks the best in a child emphasizes that she/he is loved no matter what the outcome- success or failure.

“My grandmother used to always tell me that good children never cry. I grew up thinking that crying was a sign of weakness.”- A teenager

Emotions and feelings are an integral part of every child just as it is of every adult. Children's feelings play a big part in their life because feelings often drive behavior. Their feelings are not expressed directly but are seen in their behavior. This can be challenging for parents as it requires a lot of patience and understanding to meet these emotional needs. There is often a tendency to dismiss the child's feelings as trivial or unimportant rather than as real experiences. Every child needs an environment to be able to express his feelings freely and not feel condemned or judged for having done so. The home is the right place and the parents are the best guides. Nothing speaks louder of a parent's love when they take time off to tune into their child's feelings.

The first step in helping your child with his emotions involves taking his feelings seriously by listening attentively to their story without being judgmental. Actively paying attention to your child by stopping what you are doing and turning towards him/her shows the child that you are involved. The next is to restate the core of what he/ she is trying to relate to you- both the feeling and the situation that has caused these feelings Eg. "You feel bad (the feeling) because your teacher yelled at you for not completing your homework (the situation)."

By being a good soundboard, your child copes with her feelings and makes an attempt to make choices to deal with her problem. When a child is able to talk about his/ her feelings, we open room to help them resolve their own conflicts. Offering suggestions and advice before the child has expressed his/her feelings hampers the child's effort to determine alternative strategies to deal with the issue. Most importantly, when you are upset or angry, remember to be a good role model to your child.

“For everything wrong I have done, my parents have used a stick on me. I’m afraid I can do nothing right.”- Twelve year old.

According to Ross Campbell in his book, ‘How to really love your child’ , he stresses that in many homes parents consequently conclude that discipline is the primary way of rearing a child. He emphasizes that it is an easy mistake to make especially when parents discipline the child constantly while showing little love to bring comfort to a child. Children in these homes apparently tend to doubt that they are genuinely loved. The problem is not whether to discipline but how to manifest love through discipline and when to show it in more affectionate ways. We need to discipline our children *because* we love them, not instead of loving them. The worst thing to do is to withhold love as a form of punishment. Making a child feel loved is the first and most important part of good

discipline. Without unconditional love as a foundation, no discipline technique will work. Discipline should emerge as an act of love and not an expression of anger or frustration towards the child.

Discipline is wrongly thought of as punishment but it actually means to teach or to train- teaching by instruction and practice to gain self control. Loving discipline involves training the child in the most positive ways as possible. The aim is to use their cooperation to steer their inappropriate actions in bringing about change. Here are a few things to keep in mind

- **Bring out your feelings and expectations:** Letting your child know how you feel about the behavior (Eg. “I was worried when I didn’t find you home after I came back from the grocery.”) and what you expect from the child directs him/ her into positive action. (Eg. I expect that you give me a call telling me where you are going next time on.”)
- **Reprimand the behavior and not your child:** Words that directly attack a child can be debilitating such as “You are so horrible!”, instead disapprove the child’s behavior; “It is disrespectful to hit your brother.”
- **Help your child make amends:** Showing the child how to make amends encourages them to be responsible in compensating for their behavior Eg. “What might help your brother feel better would be to apologize to him.”
- **Facing the consequences:** Allowing the child to face the consequences of his misconduct helps him/her to learn that every inappropriate action is followed by a negative consequence. (Eg. Getting up late in the morning can result in missing the school bus which results in not being able to attend school on time which therefore seeks a warning from the teacher.) Getting the child to experience the hardship of a consequence can help the child rethink his behavior in future.
- **Reward positive behavior:** Look for every opportunity to praise or commend a good behavior- the child is likely to repeat the same.
- **Modeling:** Model the behavior you want your child to emulate. If you want your child to be respectful, you need to be respectful too.

“Every Sunday, my dad makes it a point to take me to the playground for an hour and play with me.”- Six year old

Making the most of every opportunity to spend time with the children is a wise action to pursue. Children flourish on the love and attention parents give them by way of time. Time spent with the children is the greatest investment a parent can make in them. Parents have scores of things to take care of, yet spending time with each child must be seen as a priority.

Find time to play with your children, talk to them, and listen to them. Don’t be quick to give solutions. Walk with them, let them join you as you shop, hear their opinions. Give them time to relate their day to you after they return from school, hear their concerns and participate in their joys. Attend their school programs. Set aside time in a day or week to do something that they enjoy.

Be careful not to use material things to make up for being unavailable. Nothing substitutes for the time you gift them.

As is well said, there's an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything. It will not be long before your children grow up and find their own niche, before it is too late- start loving them with your presence.

The essential key to fill your child's emotional tank is true love. True love is patient, kind, truthful, unselfish, trusting, believing, hopeful, and enduring. It is not jealous, boastful, arrogant, rude, selfish, or angry. True love never fails. Children whose parents can exhibit this kind of love grow up to be well balanced people capable of passing it on.

Make your commitment and start today- love your child the unconditional way!

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