

LOVE is all you NEED

We all need to feel loved. Children, in particular, need to feel safe and secure in the love they receive from their parents or carers.



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The love needs to be consistent, predictable and enduring to enable them to feel this way. It needs to be given without strings and in full recognition that the child is a separate, unique and autonomous person with their own wants, needs and preferences. They are not an extension of their parents. Children feel cherished and nurtured by the ongoing recognition of their distinctive qualities and they thrive on it.

HOW LOVE HELPS A CHILD

This experience of being consistently and unconditionally loved triggers chemical responses in the child's brain which generate a sense of wellbeing and contentment. These chemicals (predominantly oxytocin and opioids) create feelings of well being, optimism and contentment. These are essential emotions that a child must experience as their inner bedrock. We think now that they are probably key in enabling them to develop the ability to feel the higher emotions such as warmth, compassion and generosity. These feelings are crucial for the child's being able to create healthy relationships later in life. In addition, the corrosive effects of anxiety, such as loss of self-confidence and inner turmoil and worry, are also kept at bay if the child feels loved in a way that generates the release of opioids.

HOW DO WE SHOW THIS KIND OF LOVE TO OUR CHILDREN?

Basically two things need to happen. First and foremost we need to feel a genuine desire to create a clear space in which our child can feel they have the room to take root and grow within a protective, bounded relationship with us. The relationship must give both freedom for self-expression as well as protection from life's harshness. Rabindrath Tagore, the Bengali poet, expressed this with exquisite simplicity in his poem 'Fireflies' when he wrote

'Let my love, like sunlight, surround you and yet give you illumined freedom.'

This is what a parent aims for, to illumine their child's inner world, so that they can follow the pathway to freedom that this offers and grow and develop into their true self.

The second step is to give your child 'warm fuzzies'. A 'warm fuzzy' is a child-friendly term for positive feedback. These should be unconditional and recognise the very being of your child and their matchless presence. With children warm fuzzies should be tactile – for example, hugs and cuddles – as well as verbal. But more important than the words are the tone and expression that you use. Your tone should convey warmth and attentiveness as should your facial expression and bodily movements.

Parents might use words such as – 'I love you', 'You're important', 'You're special' – with a child who has mastered language. However, with a young infant it is

the musicality of your language that matters; its tone, pace and timbre. What you say is secondary to how you say it.

As children get older warm fuzzies may become more conditional, that is based on what the child says and does rather than solely on the quality of their being. This is a natural development. It is, however, really important to continue to give unconditional warm fuzzies too, otherwise we inadvertently teach a child that their loveability is primarily based on what they do and not who they are. Ultimately, children need to feel loved for who they are right the way through childhood.

PITFALLS

When children achieve physical mobility and can use language they gain increasing control over their desires and actions and are able to implement these. This use of will power can be a cause of both pleasure and pride for parents as well as frustration and irritation. However challenging a child's behaviour feels it is absolutely imperative not to withdraw love as a punishment by, for example, becoming distant and withdrawing from the circle of trust with your child. Such actions would if repeated cause anxiety and self-doubt which over time can have serious negative outcomes both on achievement and relationships.

Avoid giving negative unconditional warm fuzzies – 'You're a bad boy' 'I don't know why I ever had you.' These will destroy your child's self-esteem and leave him confused and afraid. If you feel a negative is needed make it conditional, that is based on an action. With young children your tone and gesture will indicate the boundary, with older children you will probably want to use words too – 'It's not ok to throw all your clothes on the bathroom floor.' Whatever you do make sure you do not scare your child. Remember you are many times bigger and stronger than a young child, modulate your expression accordingly.

Love is a treasure chest that brings untold personal riches. It is the emotional inheritance you bequeath to your child that can make them perpetually wealthy. Don't worry about mistakes, these are bound to happen. Use loving ways to put them right. And remember to love yourself, too!

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