

An interview with Alfie Kohn, author of *Unconditional Parenting*

Q. Aren't there enough parenting books on the market already?

A. Well, yes and no. I think you're right that there are more than enough guides whose purpose is to get kids to do whatever they're told. Most parenting books and articles are filled with techniques designed to produce mindless obedience in children. But the authors very rarely ask parents to rethink their basic assumptions, or to consider how these techniques for changing behavior – you know, for getting kids to stop being rude or start using the potty, or whatever – might actually get in the way of our long-term goals, like wanting our children to grow into responsible, caring, happy people. There aren't nearly enough books that encourage parents to ask what their *kids* need – and how to meet those needs. Also, in my opinion, there aren't enough books for general readers that look at what research says about these issues.

Q. All right, let's start with that last part, then. What *does* the research say?

A. First of all, it says that the question isn't whether we love our children, but *how* we love them. Specifically, what matters is whether we love them unconditionally. They shouldn't have to earn our approval. Kids need us to love them for who they are, not for what they do. Our affections, in other words, shouldn't depend on their being well behaved, or getting good grades, or doing well at sports, or anything else. Unconditional love from parents is what allows kids to accept themselves as fundamentally good people, even when they screw up or fall short.

Q. But don't you think most parents would say they already love their kids unconditionally?

A. Sure. But what matters is whether the kids themselves feel loved in that way. Often they don't, particularly if we punish them for being bad – such as by using what psychologists call “love withdrawal” techniques, like time-out. Same thing if we reward or praise them, giving them what amounts to a doggie biscuit for pleasing us. Neither threats nor bribes work very well, you know, especially over the long haul. At best, they produce only temporary obedience. And in the process they do a lot of harm -- for example, by teaching children that they have to jump through hoops for us to love them. Some kids become anxious as a result, some depressed, some angry. Some stop looking to us for guidance and don't spend time with us when they're old enough to have a choice. Some feel they have to pretend to be someone they're not, so their parents *will* love them --

Q. Wait a minute. Aren't you criticizing the kind of discipline that most of us use all the time?

A. You bet. But let me immediately make it clear that if we've been relying on strategies that backfire, it's not because we're stupid or because we don't care about our kids. In fact, I spend a whole chapter explaining how we're "conditioned to be conditional" – that is, why we keep falling into the trap of using bribes and threats even though they don't really help, and even though most of us, as ex-kids, know from the other side how it feels to be treated that way. Yet sometimes we see ourselves doing, and hear ourselves saying, the exact same things that we were on the receiving end of, once upon a time – which is what I call "How did my mother get into my larynx?"

You know, parents often say to me: "I've used time-outs, I've taken away privileges, I've praised them when they're good, I've done all the things the books tell me to do, but none of it works." What I'm trying to do in *Unconditional Parenting* is help these folks understand that those techniques, which are indeed the staples of conventional discipline, are actually part of the problem! The trouble isn't with your kids; it's with what you've been talked into doing to your kids.

Q. So what are you proposing instead? Do we need to be more permissive? Because, you know, a lot of people think that parents are too permissive as it is, and that kids could, quite frankly, use a little more control.

A. Let me answer that in two ways. First of all, the real problem today isn't permissiveness. It's the *fear* of permissiveness. We're so afraid of spoiling our kids that we err in the opposite direction. I mean, sure, I've been annoyed by screaming children in restaurants whose parents don't lift a finger to intervene, but for every example like that, there are hundreds of examples of children who are restricted unnecessarily, yelled at, threatened -- basically bullied by their parents. Spend some time at a playground or a birthday party, you'll see what I mean. The real parenting epidemic in our society is the tendency to *overcontrol* children. And, by the way, liberal, educated parents tend to use techniques that are less crude but no less controlling.

My second point, though, is that I'm not arguing for more permissiveness. Kids don't need us to back off and let them do whatever the hell they want, any more than they need us to control them. That's a false dichotomy, and I reject both options. The real alternative to doing things *to* kids is to work *with* them.

Q. And your book shows us how?

A. The second half is brimming with concrete suggestions, which are organized around three central ideas: how to help kids feel unconditionally loved even when we have to say no to them; how to get in the habit of imagining the way what we say and do

appears from the child's point of view; and how to give kids more opportunities to make choices. Because, after all, children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions.

I like to think of the book as both practical *and* idealistic because it offers strategies for helping kids to grow into psychologically healthy people, not just for getting them to do what they're told. I think we all need to become more mindful of what we're doing, and its long-range implications for our children's development, rather than just operating on autoparent. I guess you could say my goal is to inspire the reader to become a better parent by building on what he or she already cares about.

Q. If you don't mind my asking, are you a parent?

A. I am. I have a 9-year-old daughter and a 5-year-old son, and my book contains plenty of stories about them. In fact, my thinking about these topics has been influenced by being a Dad as much as by all the studies I've analyzed. Fortunately, real-life experience and scientific data tend to point in the same direction, that is, toward "working with" strategies, unconditional parenting, and --

Q. And your kids don't test limits?

A. Well, if you're asking whether there have been days I've run out of patience, the answer is, Of course! But, you know, I have my doubts about that phrase "testing limits." It's often used as a justification for parents to punish – that is, to make kids suffer in order to teach them a lesson. I suspect that, by misbehaving, what children are really testing is the unconditionality of our love. My hunch is that they're acting in unacceptable ways to see if, at some point, we'll stop accepting them. And we have to reassure them: No matter what you do, no matter how frustrated I get, I will never, never, never stop loving you. Of course, at the same time, we have to teach, explain, provide guidance, set a good example, solve problems together, and all that other good stuff.

Q. Tell me more about when you run out of patience.

A. You mean, with my own kids?

Q. Right.

A. Well, one time I remember I bought tickets for a local children's theater production of *The Wizard of Oz* so I could take my daughter, who was wild about the movie. The day before the show, she threw a world-class temper tantrum about something and, I've got to tell you, I came this close to threatening her with not going to see the play unless her behavior improved. I had to remind myself that if I gave in to that temptation I'd

have been using the outing as an instrument of control rather than as an expression of love. We can't have it both ways.

Q. Interesting. And, since your book draws on research as well as experience, how about describing one study for us, to go with your story?

A. OK, here's one I thought was interesting. It's based on the premise that, even though kids don't always gravitate to the healthiest foods, they do, even as babies, tend to consume as much food as they need. They may eat very little one day but then make up for it the next. Or, rather, they do that unless we try to run their bodies for them. Two nutritionists found that parents who try to make their children eat only during mealtimes (rather than when they're hungry), or who encourage them to clean their plates (even when they obviously *aren't* hungry), or who use dessert as a reward tend to wind up with kids who lose the natural ability to regulate their caloric intake. You see what I mean? When the parents are overcontrolling, the children stop trusting their bodies' cues. What's true of food, by the way, is true of other things, too, like ethics: Too much control by us means too little opportunity for them to develop internal regulation.

Q. So you've written ... what? The anti-discipline book?

A. Um, I don't know if I'd put it that way. It's not just about discipline – it's about the ways we think about, feel about, and act with our kids. I'm trying to invite readers to question their most basic assumptions about raising children, to reconnect to their own best instincts. And I want to offer them practical strategies for shifting from “doing to” parenting to “working with” parenting – including how to replace conditional-love practices like positive reinforcement with the *unconditional* support that children need to grow into healthy, caring, responsible people.

Q. And that's a good note to end on. Thanks so much for talking with us today.

A. My pleasure.

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