

Parental Love with Strings Attached (#)

Parental Love with Strings Attached

By Alfie Kohn

[This is a slightly expanded version of the published article, which was titled "When a Parent's 'I Love You' Means 'Do as I Say.'" For a more detailed treatment of the topic discussed here, please see the book or DVD entitled Unconditional Parenting.]

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More than 50 years ago, Carl Rogers suggested that successful psychotherapy relies on three key ingredients. Therapists must be genuine rather than hiding behind a mask of professionalism. They must understand their clients' feelings accurately. And they must put aside judgment in order to express "unconditional positive regard" for those they seek to help.

That last one is a doozy – not only because it's so difficult but because of what the need for it says about how we were raised. Rogers believed that therapists need to accept their clients without any strings attached so that the clients can begin to accept themselves. And the reason so many have disowned or repressed parts of who they are is because their parents put "conditions of worth" on their care: I love you, but only when you're well-behaved (or successful in school, or impressive to other adults, or quiet, or thin, or deferential, or cute...)

The implication is that loving our children isn't enough. We have to love them unconditionally – for who they are, not for what they do. As a father, I know this is a tall order, but it becomes even more challenging now that so much of the advice we are given amounts to exactly the opposite. In effect, we're given tips in *conditional* parenting, which comes in two flavors: turn up the affection when they're good, withhold affection when they're not.

Thus, TV's "Dr. Phil" McGraw tells us in his book *Family First* that what children need or enjoy should be offered contingently, turned into rewards to be doled out or withheld so they "behave according to your wishes." And "one of the most powerful currencies for a child," he adds, "is the parents' acceptance and approval."

Likewise, Jo Frost of "Supernanny," in her book of the same name, says, "The best rewards are attention, praise, and love," and these should be held back "when the child behaves badly . . . until she says she is sorry," at which point the love is turned back on.

Note that conditional parenting isn't limited to old-school authoritarians. Some people who wouldn't dream of spanking choose instead to discipline their young children by forcibly isolating them, a tactic we prefer to call "time out." Conversely, "positive reinforcement" teaches children that they're loved – and lovable – only when they do whatever we decide is a "good job."

This raises the intriguing possibility that the problem with praise isn't that it is done the wrong way – or handed out too easily, as social conservatives insist. Rather, it might be just another method of control, analogous to punishment. The primary message of all types of conditional parenting is that children must *earn* a parent's love. A steady diet of that, Rogers warned, and children might eventually need a therapist to provide the unconditional acceptance they didn't get when it counted.

But was Rogers right? Before we toss out mainstream discipline, it would be nice to have some evidence. And now we do.

In 2004, two Israeli researchers, Avi Assor and Guy Roth, joined Edward Deci, a leading American expert on the psychology of motivation, in asking more than 100 college students whether the love they had received from their parents had seemed to depend on whether they had succeeded in school, practiced hard for sports, been considerate toward others, or suppressed emotions like anger and fear.

It turned out that children who received conditional approval were indeed somewhat more likely to act as the parent wanted. But compliance came at a steep price. First, these children tended to resent and dislike their parents. Second, they were apt to say that the way they acted was often due more to a "strong internal pressure" than to "a real sense of choice." Moreover, their happiness after succeeding at something was usually short-lived and they often felt guilty or ashamed.

In a companion study, Assor and his colleagues interviewed mothers of grown children. With this generation, too, conditional parenting proved damaging. Those mothers who, as children, sensed that they were loved only when they lived up to their parents' expectations now felt less worthy as adults. Yet despite the negative effects, these mothers were more likely to use conditional affection with their own children.

This July, the same researchers, now joined by two of Deci's colleagues at the University of Rochester, published two replications and extensions of the 2004 study. This time their subjects were ninth graders, and this time giving more attention and affection when children did what parents wanted was carefully distinguished from giving less when they did not.

The studies found that both positive and negative conditional parenting were harmful, but in slightly different ways. The positive kind sometimes succeeded in getting children to work harder on academic tasks, but at the cost of unhealthy feelings of "internal compulsion." Negative conditional parenting, meanwhile, didn't even work in the short run; it just increased the teenagers' negative feelings about their parents.

What these – and other – studies tell us, if we're able to hear the news, is that praising children for doing something right isn't a meaningful alternative to pulling back or punishing when they do something wrong. Both are examples of conditional parenting, and both are counterproductive.

The child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, who readily acknowledged that the version of negative conditional parenting known as time-out can cause "deep feelings of anxiety," nevertheless endorsed it for that very reason. "When our words are not enough," he said, "the threat of the withdrawal of our love and affection is the only sound method to impress on him that he had better conform to our request."

But the data suggest that love withdrawal isn't particularly effective at getting compliance, much less at promoting moral development. Even if we did succeed in making children obey us, though – say, by using positive reinforcement – is obedience worth the possible long-term psychological harm? Should parental love be used as a tool for controlling children?

Deeper issues also underlie a different sort of criticism. Albert Bandura, the father of the branch of psychology known as social learning theory, declared that unconditional love "would make children directionless and quite unlovable" – an assertion entirely unsupported by empirical studies. The idea that children accepted for who they are would lack direction or appeal is most informative for what it tells us about the dark view of human nature held by those who issue such warnings.

In practice, according to an impressive collection of data by Deci and others, unconditional acceptance by parents as well as teachers should be accompanied by "autonomy support": explaining reasons for requests, maximizing opportunities for the child to participate in making decisions, being encouraging without manipulating, and actively imagining how things look from the child's point of view.

The last of these features is important with respect to unconditional parenting itself. Most of us would protest that of course we love our children without any strings attached. But what counts is how things look from the perspective of the children – whether they feel just as loved when they mess up or fall short.

Carl Rogers didn't say so, but I'll bet he would have been glad to see less demand for skillful therapists if that meant more people were growing into adulthood having already felt unconditionally accepted.

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