

Expressing Affection and Love to Young Children

By Alan Fogel, Ph.D.

Few people would seriously contest the proposition that children need love. The belief that children thrive on love is not universal, but in our western culture it has become the foundation for the work of educators and parents (Kagan, 1978). Yet, for all of our certainty about the principle, the practice of giving love is often accompanied by confusion and ambivalence.

Our desire to express affection for a child — by physical contact, by expressions of concern or love, or by gifts — may be displaced by our uncertainty about how the affection will be received, or we may have concerns about becoming over involved. Adults also have important needs for their own self-fulfillment which are independent of the pleasure derived from the children in their care; needs which are as fundamental to their own growth as are those of the child.

Whatever the specifics of the behavior, participation in an encounter in which affection is offered, accepted, exchanged, or re-

jected has important emotional implications for both adult and child. I would like to address the emotional dimensions of affection giving; the nature of each person's experience, rather than his behavior. In this discussion I plan to cover three main topics: The first deals with the personal meaning of the need for love; what do we mean when we say that the child needs love? The second topic is the link between love and dependency; how can we express love while retaining a sense of

personal autonomy and encouraging the development of autonomy in the child? And finally, some of the differences between adult-child and adult-adult love will be discussed.

What does it mean to say that a child needs love?

When a child stretches out his or her arms to us, we are likely to say that he or she needs a hug. We often refer to the need for physical contact. Sometimes a child may seem sad or lonely, and we think he needs a few kind words or a gentle touch. Children seem to need to play and laugh with us, to be admired by us, and they need to be disciplined and restricted by us. The expression of love can encompass adult actions which are positive (affection, play, and gentleness) and negative (punishment and control).

This description of what the child needs is characterized by the fact that its terms are behavioral, referring to the actions of the adult. Psychologically, however, a need is not something

(Continued on page 40)



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Affection and Love

(Continued from page 39)

external to the person: it reflects some inner state. Needs are not transmitted in our everyday perceptions of objects, actions, or words, but rather in the language of personal feeling experience.

What is the personal experience of needfulness? We experience unfulfilled need as a lack of something, as a feeling of emptiness or incompleteness; it is as if something were missing. This feeling may be accompanied by anxiety or discomfort, or by feelings of distress and helplessness.

As we get older, we develop psychological resources which allow us to cope more adaptively with those feelings of emptiness. The young infant, for example, experiences need as immediate and insistent, and he expresses this through uncontrolled crying. The preschooler cries less often, but will show discomfort and anxiety in other ways.

In the case of sibling rivalry, for example, some children may attempt to hurt or hit their younger sibling while other children become overprotective of the baby. They seem motivated by the desire to not let anything harm the baby (perhaps as a way of dealing with their own desires to get rid of this new intruder). In both cases, the child's underlying insecurity is apparent.

Accompanying the need there is usually some desire or wish which provides a specific motivation for the child. The child would like to have that emptiness filled up; he would like to have the discomfort relieved. The example of sibling rivalry illustrates how the same need can be accompanied by entirely different motivations, depending on the child.

There is also another kind of need which children experience, the need for self-actualization (Maslow, 1968). Psychologists began to notice that once the emptiness-based need has been filled, children tend to behave in more creative and playful ways. It is as if the child had a need to learn and grow; to challenge him/herself and create new problems

and possibilities. The need for self-actualization is experienced as a feeling of pride, achievement or security: a sense that one is competent and complete.

How can adults express love in such a way as to be genuinely responding to the child's needs? Robert Southworth (1968) developed the following definition. "Love is an innate, permissive process that means one accepts, has empathy for, identifies with, trusts and understands another person. In addition, it means that one cares for others and wants to give of self, asking only for the same in return, in an honest, open relationship.

It implies an unselfish allowance of others to become complete human beings without imposition on their rights, and with the expectation that the integrity of each will not be trammled." This definition seems to take into account both kinds of need: the need for the things only adults can give, and the need for the things only the child himself can provide.

According to the British child psychiatrist, D. W. Winnicott (1964), children need adults in three ways: The adult is needed first as a living person; one who is warm and available. Touch, sound and sight are not love, but they are the means by which love is expressed and felt. Second, the adult presents the world to the child. The world may include the adult himself or herself. The adult must provision that world with just those things a child needs so that inner desires develop slowly in "a belief that the world can contain what is wanted and needed," that is, a sense of hope and trust in the world.

This theme of trust has been echoed in both theory (Erikson, 1950) and in modern research on adult-child relationships. Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues (1974) have found that a warm, sensitive early caregiver-child relationship promotes self-confidence, initiative and emotional security in children.

Winnicott goes on to add a third dimension of how adults are

needed by children, a dimension he describes as "disillusioning" the child. The adult in the early years tries to set up a more or less exact correspondence between the external world and the child's need, as described in the previous paragraph. As time goes on, however, this kind of world must be tempered by a new version of reality for the child: "... the mother enables the child to allow that though the world can provide something like what is needed and wanted... it will not do so automatically, nor at the very moment the mood arises or the wish is felt."

This disillusioning process is akin to what teachers and parents call discipline. The concept of discipline, however, deals primarily with the child's overt behavior and the restrictions imposed on it by adults. "Disillusioning" refers directly to the child's personal experience rather than his behavior, and Winnicott's concept may serve to illustrate why sanctions and limits can be felt as loving acts by the child.

To be disillusioned, the child must first be "illusioned" by that world in which needs are met; he must have developed a sense of trust and hope in himself and in the adult prior to any attempt to teach self-control.

Often the child's inner sense of unrest motivates him to dramatize, to rebel, or to get aggressive. Sometimes aggression can be expressed as curiosity or excitement. As adults, we must be able to recognize the types of inner feelings which may motivate behavior; we should also try to help the child cope with those feelings in an acceptable manner.

We may prevent a child from hitting a peer and suggest other ways of expressing his frustration, anger or his need for autonomy. Or we may restrict a child's exploration of his or our bodies and provide him with dolls, pictures, or words which may help to satisfy his natural sexual curiosity.

The adult's love in these situations is not expressed by the act of

Affection and Love

(Continued from page 41)

limit setting itself, but by the adult's expression of acceptance of the need which motivated the child's unacceptable behavior. This is what Southworth meant by love as a "permissive process" — the adult gives sanction to the child "to be" and "to feel," but not necessarily to do that which may be harmful to the child and to others. This idea is also reflected in the writings of Maslow (1968) and Ginott (1961).

What is the adult's experience in relation to the children?

When a child expresses a need, it may evoke within the adult some immediate reaction to the child. That children can and do affect adults' feelings, desires, and behavior is now a well-established phenomenon (Bell & Harper, 1977). This immediate reaction may depend on a variety of factors, such as how relaxed or tired or busy the adult feels, on other competing adult needs, on the needs of other children about which the adult must be aware, or even upon how much the adult honestly likes the child. In a few cases, the adult's immediate reaction to a child is spontaneous and universal, as in the let-down response of nursing mothers which is activated by seeing or hearing a hungry infant. In most cases our immediate response is tempered

by our own unique developmental and cultural history as individuals.

The range of individual differences between adults is vast. Some can tolerate high levels of noise and activity; others can't relax until children are quiet and calm. One adult will look on a child's aggression in an accepting way; another will feel threatened and angered by it.

Adults will also differ in their

willingness to meet children's needs and in their personal reactions to a particular need, reactions which may range from repugnance, to indifference, to warm acceptance.

There may be more to the adult's total response to the child than the immediate reaction described above. There may also be a contemporaneous empathic response,

(Continued on page 42)



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Affection and Love

(Continued from page 41)

a feeling in the adult which is the result of the adult's conjecture about what the child might be feeling. Empathic responses are based on recollections of something one felt in the past in a similar situation. This is not simply a matter of seeing the world from the child's perspective — a feat which is purely cognitive.

Rather, the adult identifies with the child by re-enacting his or her own experiences which the adult presumes are related to what the child is currently experiencing (Olden, 1953). This is a cognitive effort to the extent that the adult must make a judgment or evaluation of the correctness of the empathic response, but the actual empathic reaction, whether or not it matches the child's experiences, is always a feeling experience for the adult.

If a child bruises his knee from a fall and cries, the empathic response involves a re-enactment of a similar hurt which the adult has experienced. In this sense, when the adult makes a sad expression and says comforting things to the child, the adult is responding and reacting to a re-living of his/her own pain, a pain which the adult now identifies as being what he/she believes the child to be feeling. This is different from our ordinary concept of "taking the role of the other," which is part of most theories of cognitive development (Kohlberg, 1969; Mead, 1934).

The empathic reaction, therefore, does not depend entirely on one's level of cognitive development. In addition to having the cognitive capacities to separate self from other, one must also be willing and able to recall and re-experience the pain and joy of one's own childhood. This can be difficult since past experience is often laden with sanctions such as "it is over and done with" or "it is too painful to recall."

Empathy for children is different from empathy between adults because to respond empathically to the child, the adult must re-enact a long-ago past. A child's

unruly or over-emotional behavior may be a threat to the adult who has struggled hard to win a sense of control over his or her own activities and desires (Olden, 1953). For example, a child might break something or be messy or loud. For some adults, this behavior represents a symbolic destruction of the adult's achievement of order, peace, and cleanliness, so the child is seen as a threat and the adult feels insecure. It is often easier to feel empathy for another adult who has the same values and same capacities.

Ambivalence vs. Certainty In Expressing Love to Children

The two sets of feelings experienced by the adult — the immediate response and the empathic response — may be harmonious. The adult may experience a need to give and receive affection from the child, plus a desire to hug the child (immediate response) and at the same time have a sense that the child has a need to be held (empathic response). Or the adult may desire to be alone and simultaneously sense the child's wish to be left alone.

In these cases, when the empathic response is correct and it is matched by the immediate reaction, the adult has the feeling of certainty and security — the action taken "feels right" for both the adult and the child. The same process works in discipline situations when the adult's desire to impose some limit (bedtime at 8 o'clock) is matched by the adult's empathic sense that the child feels genuinely tired at that time. In these kinds of situations, it is most likely that the child feels fully appreciated and loved by the adult, and it is also when the adult feels the most gratified that her love is felt by the child.

In the first few weeks of life, the mother's desire to nurse is matched by the infant's desire to feed; the mother's satisfaction at gazing at her baby matches the baby's strong preference for looking at faces (Freedman, 1974). These mechanisms are biological guarantees that emotional bonds will take root between child and adult during the first few days.

As the child gets older, the achievement of this bond depends increasingly upon joint experience and the adult's familiarity with the child. So those perfect matches between adults and young children, when they occur, are usually the product of a lot of hard work which has been invested in developing a special and unique relationship with each individual child.

But feelings of uncertainty may creep into an adult's awareness about his or her relationship with a child. Adults may have concerns about the appropriateness of expressing love to a particular child at a particular moment, such as can I ever give enough to make the child feel truly loved? If I can't or don't want to meet the child's needs and demands, will he still feel loved by me? These dilemmas have their roots in situations in which the empathic and the immediate reactions are in conflict.

For example, a baby's cry makes the adult empathically aware of the baby's need but the immediate response to the baby may involve fear that the infant will become too dependent on the adult's continued presence. The adult may feel used and confined and may desire to ignore the infant, at least for a while. Whether that desire is carried through depends on a complex set of external factors (Dunn, 1977).

One factor is the adult's assessment of the urgency of the need, both in herself and in the baby. The isolated mother may be desperate to get out of the house. The baby's age and state of health become components for consideration, affecting the adult's judgment of the capacity of the infant for greater self-reliance. If things go very well, the adult begins to feel used and confined at just the time when the infant begins to develop self-regulatory capacities for delay of gratification (Winnicott, 1964).

You can tell this in an infant, for example, when the cry becomes less insistent, less demanding. In this case, the adult's need for independence and the child's capacity for it are developing in

synchrony. And there was synchrony so long as the adult's desire to provide coincided with the child's feelings of helplessness.

A conflict arises when the immediate reaction of the adult is to provide and cuddle regardless of the child's need for such a response. If the adult can recognize his or her own need to love and cuddle her baby, and at the same time recognize her baby's need to be more self-sufficient, the adult will defer to the infant and seek other outlets for her need.

Often the adult's need to express love may block the adult's ability to empathically perceive the child's need for independent growth; the adult may fear losing the child's love or losing what she sees as a very important part of her self-image as a nurturant person. When this happens, the adult unknowingly pushes the child to greater dependency.

Another alternative is that the adult empathically perceives the child has a need for love, but allows this perception to always

take precedence over any of her own needs. This self-sacrificing attitude eventually leads to an accumulation of inner directed tension, anxiety and anger because the adult's own feelings of emptiness go unrecognized and, therefore, unfulfilled for so long. The adult in this situation needs to be able to assess, approve and prioritize her needs, then reconcile their fulfillment with other responsibilities and demands.

It is important to remember that interacting with children is a process which takes place over a long period of time. In that process there is rarely a time when immediate and empathic reactions are perfectly matched, but we attempt to work toward some balance over time so that neither we nor the child feels incomplete. The deeper conflicts are not simply the result of a single exchange between adult and child, but of a process which unfolds over weeks and months in such a way that the balance of need satisfaction gets tipped in the direc-

tion of the child or the adult for too long a duration.

Giving and Receiving Love

All children are dependent in some respects on the adults around them. Making children independent in the sense that they never need to rely on us or on others is not a desirable goal. Rather, we must give them the capacity to recognize their own needs and desires, to gain control over them, and to teach them appropriate ways to meet those needs.

Erik Erikson (1950) stressed the importance of what he called "autonomy," by which he means a child's sense of self-control to rely or not to rely on others as needed; a sense of self from which springs good will and pride. If the adults have been sensitive to both their own and the child's needs and desires, the child will develop faith and trust in that adult's ability to help as well as a willingness and capacity to share his joys and his difficulties with the adult.

(Continued on page 44)

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Affection and Love

(Continued from page 43)

Dependency refers to the kind of relationship in which the child stays with the adult, not out of trust, but out of fear or greed or because the child continues to hope that his needs will be met.

In his review of current research on childrearing, Martin Hoffman (1975b) found that children who were popular, secure and self-confident were more likely to help others than children who do not receive social approval (Staub & Sherk, 1970), and those children whose families expressed a large amount of physical affection were more likely to help others than children who did not get much affection (Hoffman, 1975a). Hoffman writes that "perhaps egoistic need fulfillment reduces preoccupation with one's own concerns and thus leaves one more open and responsive to the needs of others" (Hoffman, 1975b).

If the child were fully capable of empathy, he should be able to identify with many of the adult's feelings and to recognize these feelings as belonging to the inner reality of the adult, a reality which the child would have to perceive as independent from his own. According to Hoffman (1975b), children are incapable of identifying in this way with an adult's complex array of experiences until they have at least begun to develop a stable sense of their own identity, beginning around six to nine years of age and continuing through adolescence and young adulthood.

Children under six have very strong feelings for and about their parents and teachers, but it seems unrealistic for the adult to expect mature forms of empathy from the young child. This means that if adults who raise or teach children are to acquire their own sense of fulfillment, they are more likely to succeed by sharing the joys and difficulties about their children with other emotionally mature adults.

In terms of the adult's world of personal experience, work with children can be particularly frustrating. Because children have

the whole array of human needs and desires — to develop competence, for physical well-being and material security, for emotional security, for acceptance and the need to belong, for play and the need for diversity, for aesthetic satisfaction and the need for beauty and order, and for love — they can move and excite the adult in much the same way that another adult might.

But because of children's limitations with regard to appreciating how they affect us, adults are faced with feelings and desires that can never be worked out with the original sources of those desires (the child). Adults and children alike are affected by other's behavior, and they both feel the need to be loved and recognized, but the purveyors of empathic love are almost always adults.

There is a good deal of clinical and research evidence to show that adults who have the most trouble working with children are those who have been cut off from the supportive peer networks of the adult world (Sutherland, 1972). The loss of adult peers, parents or spouses can have a serious affect on the parents' ability to deal with their children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1977). Teachers need to have an institutionalized network of colleagues, supervisors, conferences and workshops — not to mention friends and family — in order to share and work through the feelings generated by their work with children.

I have avoided giving specific rules about when to use or not to use physical affection, kind words or negative sanctions. Each of these behaviors could be used in a loving way or in a way which ultimately meets the adult's needs more directly than those of the child. Rather, I have tried to focus attention away from action to feeling and to motivation. I submit that the art of teaching (and parenting) is partly technique — the mastery of one's own behavior and of a set of educational materials — and partly self-discovery. We must be willing to probe the depths and sources of our own feelings if we are ever to get in

touch with the needs of our children.



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