

Birth to Childhood

The need for love is built into us from the womb. While in the womb a child senses the closeness of the mother and responds to the voices of parents. At birth, contact with mother cements the love and unconditional love is born. Babies are completely open and trusting; they love and expect to be loved. They know nothing about conditional love so they do not measure love and they do not judge. If a new-born baby is startled, the child's arms will fly up and out, then clutch desperately for something to hold on to; they innately know that holding and being held is good. It is well-known that a baby who is not held and is not shown love fails to thrive. This was made starkly obvious during the years when large orphanages were in vogue around the world. In some institutions where babies were rarely picked up and cuddled it was later shown that the lack of nurture caused many to die, even though they were fed enough to sustain life. Babies, even today, who do not receive stimulation and love in the first year are at risk of poor brain development and social skills. This need for love is something we do not outgrow and the ability to form close bonds is shaped by our early experiences.

Physical contact – the intimate cuddling, stroking and playing together – is very precious for babies and older children and that feeling of warmth, of being wanted and loved, stays with each of us as we grow into adults. In *Psycho-Cybernetics*, Maxwell Maltz says, “It is not the child who is taught *about* love but the child who has *experienced* love that grows into a healthy, happy, well-adjusted adult.” People are affected all their lives by the amount of love they received as a child, or the amount they failed to receive.

Most parents would be horrified if they were told their children did not feel loved and cared for. The reason can be the difference between how children need love to be shown to them and the way adults show love. As parents we need to show our love in our actions as well as our words because children are behaviourally motivated and adults are more verbally oriented. For example, a child cannot fully comprehend the words, “I love you” until they are much older. Certainly, parents should use those words, but they should be followed up with actions such as hugging and gentle touching and by showing love in how they look at a child. Loving eye contact is very powerful to a child.

Genuine love is unconditional and this is the kind of love a child needs. They need to know they are loved, even if they have done something wrong. This does not mean they should be allowed to get away with doing wrong because children crave boundaries to make them feel safe. Focused attention and loving discipline, on the other hand, can make a child feel they are the centre of their parents' world and they will grow up with a healthy self-esteem and a love and respect for others. If you want your children to find true happiness, teach them to love the ‘agape’ kind of love where they love completely and selflessly by making themselves a gift to others.