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Lesson 4: A Child's need for Love

The need to be loved is exceptionally strong in all human beings. From childhood to old age, humans want to be loved by those around them. Love connects people in the strongest of ways. It produces care and concern, without which no one would take the responsibility of looking after others. Love makes the difficulties of life bearable, and helps ease the struggles of life. The love given to a child is more important than any material goods the family can provide.

Life cannot just run on cold and hard rules. The warmth of love is necessary to infuse spirit and joy in life. A home without love, however orderly and organized, has not fulfilled its true purpose. A family is not just a micro-organization where the needs of members are met. This could be done by a state run facility. A family's outstanding characteristic is that members love one another, and this emotion binds them together.

Love or the lack of it has a profound effect on the lives of children. Their mental capabilities, their fluency of speech, their observations and deductions on life, are all affected by it. That is why Islam emphasizes the display of love to one's family. The Holy Prophet (S) loved his grandsons dearly, and often showed great affection to them in public.

When Husayn (a) got on his back while he was in *sajdah*, the Holy Prophet (S) prolonged his *sajdah*. He could not bear to see his grandsons cry, or get hurt. He encouraged his companions to show affection to their children.

Effects of Love

A child who knows he is loved has a great head start on life.

1. He is happier and calmer. A child who is loved is at peace with the world, and is able to bear disappointments better. Without love, a child's world is bleak. Such a child often resorts to misbehavior to get attention.

2. He is more confident of himself. He knows that he is worthy of being loved, and that is a great boost

to his self–esteem.

3. He can form better relationships with others. A loving relationship with the parents makes the child a kinder, more loving person. Lack of love hardens the heart, and he could become less prone to showing love for others.

4. Has a positive outlook on life. A child who is loved looks at the world with enthusiasm He will be eager to try and experience new things. A loveless home produces a negative outlook, in which the natural curiosity and interest in life is deadened.

5. The child will be more responsive to what parents tell him. Reproaches and scoldings become bearable when he knows he is loved. Parental orders are followed with more enthusiasm.

Letting the child know he is loved

It goes without saying that most parents love their children dearly. It is a natural instinct placed by the Almighty into the heart of all parents. This love for children is a sign of the wisdom of Allah, for without it no parent would have borne all the pains and troubles of raising a child.

However, many parents think that children know, without being told, that parents love them. They do not realize that children need to be reassured constantly. The effects of love must be evident in the speech and behavior of the parents. Children do not have the wisdom and insight of adults to realize that even punishments and reproaches are signs of love. They often perceive the actions of the parents as a proof of the lack of love. It is thus very important to display love to the child, or at least inform him about it in subtle ways.

The display of love varies with the age and level of the child. It is most important at the very young age when children need to be cuddled and hugged. For a baby, physical display of love is necessary for positive growth and development. All through the toddler years physical affection remains the most prominent way of displaying love. As the child grows, this changes to less direct ways of showing affection.

The occasional physical touch is still necessary, but is not the main way of showing love. Now the child has various needs and desires. To be considerate of his desires, talking to him constantly, reading to him, taking interest in his schoolwork etc. are all part of love. Love shows its bright face in the form of a smile, a tender tone, a patient ear, etc. A parent's full attention tells the child he is loved enough to warrant it.

The older child has friends who are every important to him. To give importance to his friends is a good way of displaying love for him. Generally speaking, when a parent gives positive attention to the child, apart from the regular chores of bathing, feeding, etc. the child understands that he is loved.

The love of a mother

There is no doubt that the love of a mother is a very special gift from the Almighty for a child. It differs from the love of a father, or the love of any other person. The tender hand of a mother and her soothing voice has calmed many a troubled child.

Mothers are thus the main instruments of transmitting love to the child. At its best, the love of a mother is completely unselfish, wanting nothing in return for the tremendous amounts of time and energy spent in raising the children.

From the time of birth, when a child knows the mother as a source of food and comfort, and all through childhood, the mother is the main caregiver for the child. The atmosphere at home depends on the nature of the mother. A loving, caring mother can do a great deal to make her family a happy and emotionally healthy family.

Unconditional Love

Some parents only love their children if they fulfill certain expectations. Gender sometimes plays a great role. So a boy after a few daughters elicits great affection and attention. Some families just prefer boys, even if they have equal numbers of both. Such gender biases are greatly condemned in Islam. The Holy Prophet (S) had a daughter at a time when daughters were disliked. He showed great love and respect for her despite the taunts of the Arabs.

Some parents only show their love for the child if he is attractive, behaves well, and generally lives up to their expectations. Such a love is conditional. If the child brings a good report card, he is showered with praise and affection. A bad report card will not only bring reproach for the low marks, but will make the child feel completely rejected.

Parents often forget that it is only a particular act that should be condemned, not the child in general. A child who obeys is praised for his obedience, but loved for himself. In the same way, a child who is disobedient is reproached for his disobedience, but still loved for himself.

Many parents fail to draw the line and make their love conditional to the acts of the child. All children have faults, and the parental reaction to these faults sometimes convinces a child that he is not loved at all. It is necessary that parents ensure that the child understands it is only his act that is disliked and not he himself.

A child deserves the unconditional love of the parents.

Excessive Love

A potential danger for many parents is excessive love for the children. It is often difficult to control the intensity of emotion one feels for a child. Thus a child may be showered with a lot of love, often misdirected. Everything in excess is harmful, and too much love is detrimental to the child. The fifth Imam, Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a) has said: *The worst of parents are those who transgress the limits in their love and goodness to their children.*

Excessive love is when a parent pampers the child, refusing to let him face any trouble or difficulty, tending to his every need, and giving in to his desires. Its results could include:

1 -The child becomes totally reliant on the parents. Even as he grows, the chances of emotional and mental maturity are slim. He has less courage and feels offended easily. He becomes more like a soft egg which needs constant protection.

2 - The demands of the child who is excessively loved are unending. He will constantly want more – more attention, more treats, more toys etc. When refused or frustrated, he will resort to whining and complaining.

3 - He may become very egoistic, and expect the same degree of attention from others in his life. The child feels that he is the center of the world for his parents, and thus all things should revolve around him. He believes he has no faults, or at least none that others can perceive. This elevated perception of himself often lands him in trouble, especially when others do not see him in the same way.

4 - When others will not give him the same attention and pampering he has known from his parents, he will be unable to bear the disappointment. Often such people lose confidence in themselves, and feel they are not worth much as they have not been granted the degree of attention they believe is their due.

Wise Words

1. Kiss your children often, for every display of affection will raise your status in Heaven.
Holy Prophet (S)

2. Allah has mercy on a parent who loves his child greatly.
Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a)

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