

## Will you accept me as I am?

*Rob Parsons, Care for the Family's chairman and founder, talks about the most valuable gift that parents can give a child.*

I believe that the most important thing a parent can do for their children is to give them this: their unconditional love and acceptance.

Love may be an obvious choice, but I believe the gift of acceptance is also so important. If a child does not feel accepted by their parents, it is almost impossible for them to feel loved by them. One of the greatest things we can do for our children is to send them into adulthood believing that at least their parents accept them for who they are.

### "I accept the way you look"

One of the greatest pressures on children today is the way they look. Children aren't stupid; they know that ugly girls don't get on the front covers of teen magazines, or unattractive boys on the inside pages.

From her infancy, your daughter will assess from a million messages – some screamed at her from adverts, some whispered in school playgrounds, and most unsaid – whether or not she is 'beautiful'. Unless she is destined to be one of the few who meet the standard, she will have to do battle with the world if she is to hold on to her self-esteem. She ought not to have to do battle in her home.

How do we usually decide whether we are acceptable and have worth? The answer is that we perceive this from outside ourselves – from others – especially from those we love and respect. And what makes life particularly hard for our children is that so often when their self-esteem is at its most vulnerable, their peers are at their most hurtful.

I doubt we'll ever be able to do much to change the cruelty of the very young, but life should be different around our parents. I am saddened when I hear parents make derogatory comments, even in a humorous vein, about the physical appearance of their children – especially in front of others.

### "I accept you irrespective of what you achieve"

The second way that we show our children whether or not they are accepted is by our attitude to their achievements. One of the most testing aspects of parenthood is to balance motivating our children to reach their potential, without instilling in them the belief that our love for them is conditional on how they perform.

Most children do need motivating in the area of school work, and it's often difficult to find the right balance. It's possible to be too easy-going and not push a child hard enough, or to push too hard and pressurise them. But above all – in the middle of all the yelling, the blackmail, and the forced study guides for breakfast – our children should know for a certainty that they are loved anyway.

Of course, it's good to give children opportunities, and activities like piano lessons and football coaching can be wonderful, so long as we don't make it hard to just have fun. The main aim should be that our children enjoy playing the piano and being on the football field, not that they end up at the Festival Hall or playing at Wembley.

Acceptance doesn't mean that we don't try to encourage our children to get



better grades, or motivate them to achieve their best. It doesn't even mean that we don't hope they will change in some ways, but it does mean that we do not put on them the burden of being someone they cannot be.

We send our children into a world that will continually judge them. They will be forced to ask themselves, "Am I clever/determined/successful/sociable enough?" And, of course, "Am I attractive enough?" Matching up to the demands of others is a wearisome business. But we do our children a wonderful service if we send them into that world with an unshakeable belief that there is at least one person who, irrespective of their grades, weight or athletic genius, loves and accepts them unconditionally. It really is the greatest gift. Most of us, as adults, are still searching for somebody to love us like that.



Care for the Family's aim is to promote strong family relationships and to help those who face family difficulties.

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