

Is Unconditional Love Really Enough?

When my son was born, he was the first of his generation. My husband comes from a big family, and I have a rather large extended family. When you come from a baby-obsessed group like ours, life is an endless supply of hugs, kisses, adoration and attention.

My son could make a crowded room grow quiet in an instant with his happy chatter or little baby steps. He had a lineup of aunts, uncles, grandmas, grandpas and cousins waiting for their turn to hold him, play with him and, yes, even change him. And the flow of love never stopped, even when his sister and cousins came along.

At home, my husband and I gave him our **attention** and fostered his curiosities and interests. We practiced **positive reinforcement** and **praise** versus **negative criticism** as a way to change behaviors. He was showered with love and support. And yet as he began to grow, I witnessed how he struggled with insecurities, social anxieties, fears and lack of confidence.

I was flummoxed. “Isn’t love all you need?” I prayed for inspiration and wisdom—and the response was the realization that unconditional love and support from your family is the foundation. Their love gives you the strength to go out in the world and take risks because you know there’s a safe place to fall if you don’t succeed.

Family has your back and will be there with you every step of the way, no matter what. And that’s what my son was blessed with: a strong foundation. But self-esteem comes from personal achievement. You can praise and pass out certificates and stickers and clap and give your undivided attention, but you cannot give someone confidence.

I could see my son falling behind developmentally and academically with his peers. Even though he couldn't express it, I could tell he felt like someone who'll never be as good as anyone else.

Taking a Risk So He Can Take Risks

At age 13, my son was officially diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism. The diagnosis provided insights into his challenges and a pathway toward the right educational and social interventions—but the key to helping him to grow and thrive has always been finding him opportunities to accomplish and be successful on his own.

I became extremely focused and listened for anything he would talk about to give me a clue for finding something—anything—he was interested in where his involvement could result in personal achievement. Notice the “could.” No matter what I'd find, there was a risk that he'd get frustrated, feel like a failure and want to give up too soon. But I had to take that risk so he had opportunities for success. I had to become a really good matchmaker for his interests and abilities.

Making a U-Turn Toward Opportunity

We were driving in the car, and my son said in casual conversation that he thought he might like to do karate. The voice inside my head screamed, “This is it!” I literally made a U-turn (ask my mother, who was visiting) and signed him up. He loved the karate gi (uniform), the structure and discipline of the class, the traditions, and learning the moves. He worked hard and was motivated to earn his belts.

Here's an entry in my journal that summarizes what happened: “Tonight you became an orange belt! I was so nervous. You were calm and collected. You gave it everything you had ... and you succeeded! It wasn't given to you out of kindness. You earned it! I was so proud and happy for your personal victory.”

And there it was—the proof that his personal sense of **accomplishment** could make a **positive impact** on his **self-esteem**. He ultimately reached a brown belt level before leaving karate behind for acting, his most dramatically life-altering, confidence-building journey ever.

He had demonstrated a talent for acting and was so impressive in a featured role that the youth theater group's director at our church cast him the following year as Harry McAfee in *Bye Bye Birdie*.

On the first night of the production, I was getting ready for intermission refreshments in the back of the auditorium. I'll never forget the roar of the crowd every time my son appeared on stage. He had them captivated! Even the kids who teased and taunted him when he was younger were crying because they were laughing so hard. Such a triumphant moment.

My son is a gift from God. Staying focused, having faith that I'll be given the answers I need to help him, and then finding opportunities where he can shine have been my most successful **parenting** techniques, hands down. These and unconditional love are continuing to carry him even now as an adult.

Jodi Murphy has been a freelance marketing specialist for the last 25+, a journalist in the design/luxury lifestyle industry, and co-founder of Nesting Newbies. However, her most important role and her life's passion is being a mom. She founded Geek Club Books to share her son's life on the autism spectrum in a positive and entertaining way. Find out more about the Mighty League, their new storybook app, at .