

# TEN NEEDS & RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

*M. K. Doc Downing Ph.D., LMFT*

Every child has a right to be raised in a family that strengthens his/her sense of self-worth (internal), self-image (external), and his/her overall sense of being a precious and valuable person. Every child needs to feel that he/she is capable and can make a difference in his/her world. Children who are raised not to have these feelings about themselves are the ones who are most likely to be abused and used by other children and adults.

As parents and people who care about children, there are things that you can do to help children. The following is a list of the ten things that a child needs from you so that he/she may be equipped with the emotional and coping skills to solve the problems that will confront them.

**Number One: Children need to be able to express their feelings, and have their feelings accepted.** Children need to be heard as well as seen! Every child needs to be able to express their feelings and have those feelings accepted by the adults in their lives.

*Acceptance does not mean approval.*

It is very important that you listen to your child's feelings. "If I tell you how I feel and you don't accept what I feel, that is all that I have." To listen does not mean you agree with them or like what they say. To accept does not mean you approve of what they say. Acceptance means you acknowledge that that is where the child is at the moment. A child's feelings can and do change very quickly. By accepting their feelings, it allows the child to experience the feeling and move on to enjoying the rest of life.

If you will listen to your child's feelings, all of them, without reacting or judging, then your child will conclude, "Hey, I must be worth listening to. I must be a valuable person." The words children use, "good or bad," were learned from you and from those around them.

The problem is not with the kids, it's with us. In every family, there are certain words and phrases that are unacceptable for our children to use. These words are unacceptable because we have said so. Every family has their own list of these "bad" words and phrases. However, these taboo words are seldom spelled out ahead of time, so children are left to guess or figure them out as they go. For the child, banned words can be confusing to learn. "Don't sass me", is an example of a response that tells the child when they have crossed our line. "But Daddy, you told Mother to shut up!" Children are not born knowing which words are appropriate and which are not.

Listening to a person's feelings is not the same as listening to the words. You need to listen to what your child is saying and not just react. The hard part is not reacting.

Let me give you an example. After you have gotten through yelling at your child because he was moving too slowly and you were going to be late for nursery school, you hear your four year-old say, "I want a new Mommy; I don't want a new Daddy, I just want a new Mommy." Don't react, Mom. What is your child feeling? Did you hear the child's feelings or just the words? If you had been listening to the feelings you might have heard, "Mommy, you are yelling too much and I feel pressured and unloved. Daddy doesn't yell at me as much as you do." Hearing the feelings allows for better responses, "I can understand how you must be feeling. It is hard when Mommy yells at you. When I was a little girl and my mother yelled at me, sometimes I wouldn't feel loved. But, what I found out was that she yelled at me because she loved me and didn't want me to be late for school."

### **Number Two: Children need to learn acceptable ways of expressing their feelings.**

Children are not born knowing the names of what they feel. Just because you are listening to your child's feelings does not mean that it is not important for the child to learn what words are not acceptable.

**To listen does not mean you agree.** Darren came home from preschool one day where he had had a bad day. Then, when his dad told him to pick up his toys, his response was, "Daddy I hate you." (Hate was one of the unacceptable words in their house.) Now, his Dad knew that **the opposite of love was not hate or anger, but indifference, not caring** so, instead of yelling at his kid, dad responded with, "Yeah, and sometimes I get angry at you too, and it is Ok, isn't it?" Over a period of a couple of weeks, Darren used the "hate" word twice more and each time, his Dad responded the same way, "Yeah, and sometimes I get angry at you too, and it is Ok, isn't it?" Then one day, Darren came in and said, "Daddy, I'm angry at you, it is OK, isn't it?" Without a struggle, Darren had learned a new way of expressing his anger and being accepted at the same time!

Another problem is that small children may use behavioral terms to express emotional feelings. In one of my parenting classes, I had a young father with a three-year-old who was in nursery school. After the second class, the father came up to me and said, "I'm really upset. My three-year-old son is lying to me." Now, I know children aren't born knowing how to lie; in fact they will be embarrassingly honest until they get punished for being honest.

The father went on to explain, "Well, Jakob had gone to Fresno State on a field trip and when he got off the bus he was not excited like the other children, he was moping around; he acted depressed." (Little children do get depressed and sometimes get very depressed.) His dad said, "What's the matter Jakob?" The boy responded, "Nothing, nothing." Father and son rode home in silence. After a while, Jakob comes up to his father and says, "Daddy what's this?" There was just a little flick of ink on his arm. Dad

says, "Looks like somebody flicked you with an ink pen." The boy responded with, "Yes, the bus driver did that. He was chasing me with his pen and all the kids were laughing at me, so I took him out of his seat, threw him on the floor and stomped on him." The father's conclusion was, "See, my three-year-old is lying to me."

"No he isn't. He is telling you the absolute truth," I responded. "You see, your son doesn't know the words to tell you how he felt. So, he drew a behavioral picture of what he felt like doing. This is what he wished he could do. What you need to do is teach him to express the feelings behind the behavioral picture. I would not want him, when he is sixteen years-old, 180 pounds, to take someone who is teasing him, pick him up and stomp on him, then get sent to juvenile detention." In this case, a helpful response might have been, "If the bus driver had been chasing me with a pen and the kids were laughing at me, I would have felt angry, embarrassed and powerless." Now he has some words that he can use to identify how he feels. In that way, he won't end up acting out when his feelings start going up.

Research indicates that children with poor feeling vocabulary have a much greater chance of ending up in a juvenile detention facility. They tend to act out their anger physically when they don't have acceptable verbal ways of expressing it.

### **Number Three: Children need a sense of safety, security and trust.**

The first developmental stage that your child will go through is the need for trust and security, to be taken care of. Every child needs this. In fact, you will never lose the need to have somebody you can trust and feel secure with. By learning to trust your parents, you learn to trust yourself and later, your mate. Homes that are not safe emotionally or physically create scars that will impact your child for the rest of his/her life. Unsafe homes are not just homes where there are physically unsafe conditions, but they are homes where emotional abuse such as name calling, putdowns, physical threats and conditional love, are employed as ways of controlling the child.

Another type of physically and emotionally unsafe home is where molest, incest or physically abusive punishment is used. Other things that could make a home unsafe are major losses resulting in abandonment issues. These can result from divorce, deaths, emotional separation of parents and revolving sexual partners. When a child grows up with major losses or abandonments, the conclusion is that the world is not a safe place because everyone will leave him, because he is not a valuable or loveable person.

A safe home is where the child develops his/her own sense of autonomy and control. You need to be able to give your children a sense of autonomy within your acceptable limits. That's the key.....*within your acceptable limits*. Over protected children are children who are not given the opportunity to practice making decisions. A child who has never had the opportunity to make bad decisions doesn't suddenly know how to make good decisions when they turn eighteen. Giving children choices that they can make on their own is really important. "Good judgment comes from experience, and experience, well that comes from making bad judgments."

#### **Number Four: Children need to have failure experiences to learn from.**

Here is an example of a learning failure. Four year old Darren found a Bic safety razor. I knew that he could not cut his throat with it. He could scratch himself or nick his finger (this was before the AIDS virus), but that was as much damage as he could do. I told him, "Darren, I don't want you to play with that. It might hurt you." Darren was very insistent, "I want to play with it."

"Darren, I would really prefer that you not play with it, because what might happen is you could cut your finger."

"No I won't, no I won't," he insisted.

"Okay, Darren. But, it's liable to make you bleed; you're liable to hurt yourself."

No amount of warning was going to change his mind, so I let him take the razor. Three minutes later he came in screaming with one drop of blood on his finger. In a very calm, non-accusatory voice, I simply said, "Wow, that's a hard way to learn about safety razors, isn't it Darren?" I didn't have to get upset, or angry. Darren was already upset. "Let's go put a bandage on it." So we went in and put a bandage on it. And then I said once more and for the last time, "Boy, that was a hard way to learn about razors, wasn't it?"

About three months later, Margie and I were at our apartment pool when Darren came out with a glass full of juice. I said "Darren, you shouldn't bring glass out to the pool; it could break and hurt you." He got this stricken look on his face and let go of the glass; I caught it just before it hit the cement. For the next six months, I could have told him anything and he would nod and say, "That's right daddy, that's right."

Darren had learned an absolute truth, "Daddies know what can hurt you." You see, you learn by your failures. Now of course, I wouldn't have given him a butcher knife or something that he could have really hurt himself with. The goal was to let him have learning failures that he could handle.

Have you ever met someone who does not listen to advice and has to personally make every mistake for themselves? Let me suggest a couple of ways that create that kind of person. I could have said to Darren, "No, you can't play with the razor," then taken it and put it up out of his reach. Of course, what he would have done when I was not looking was to get it down, play with it, get nicked, but say to himself, "Yeah, but next time I'll do it and you won't catch me." The other way I could have ruined the experience, if after he nicked himself, was to get all upset and say things like, "See, you never listen to me. What is the matter with you?" In either case, Darren's response would have been not to learn from the experience except in negative ways and he wouldn't have learned to trust me.

**Number five: Children need to have success experiences.** Someone said, “Nothing succeeds like success.” What happens though, is that we often set our children up to compete with us, which is a formula for their failure. You need to give them opportunities where they can be successful.

One of the biggest lies that was ever told to many of us was, “If you can’t do a job right, don’t do it at all.” There are very few things in this world you can do absolutely right the first time. If you set your child up to “don’t do a job unless you can do it right”, you teach your child either to become a perfectionist, which would drive him and everybody else out of their mind, or, the child won’t even try because they know that they cannot do it right the first time. Children must have success experiences to develop confidence and an excitement about learning.

Never set a child up in a situation where they are in direct competition with you, whether it is fishing, cooking or cleaning their room. Darren, at five, wanted to take karate. Mother thought that was a great idea, “We can take it together.” I didn’t think that was a good idea, because there was no way that Darren could compete or keep up with Mom’s skill if they started at the same time. My suggestion was that Darren start taking Karate for six months, then Mom could start. That way Darren would have a skill that he was better at than Mom and then he could “help” Mom with her katas. Talk about a success experience. Darren felt important; he could help Mom with something she did not know anything about.

**Number six: Children need to be taught effective ways of solving problems without there being losers.** So often, you want to solve your children’s problems for them by using quick fixes. “Ashlee, tell your sister that you are sorry.” Telling someone you are sorry is NOT problem solving without losers, nor is telling your child, “You do it because I said so.”

The best way to teach effective problem solving is to lead by example with your mate and then with your children. That means first, you had better know how to solve problems without losers. Problem solving without losers starts with one person **LISTENING** to the other, while the person talking starts by sharing **how they are feeling** about the conflict. What you feel is not what you think and your feelings are not your judgments. (If you are having problems with doing this, consult a list of feeling words.) After both have shared and listened to each other’s feelings, then, and only then, share what each sees as the problem. Then you reverse roles and the person who was talking becomes the listener and the listening person becomes the talker. The trick here is to make sure that only one person is talking at a time. About 80% of all arguments can be settled just by sharing and listening to each other’s feelings.

I have noticed that parents seem to believe it is their responsibility to go around settling their children’s squabbles. This is not a good learning experience for your children. It gives the message that they are not able to solve their own conflicts. One of the things I told my kids, when they got old enough to fight, was that it was their responsibility to work out their differences. I have four children who are close in age. When they would

fight and the noise got louder and louder, I would say to them, “Go outside to do your fighting, the noise hurts my ears. Don’t come to me unless there is blood. You kids need to learn how to solve your own problems and not have me jumping in.” If I’m always jumping in and solving their problems, when do they get to learn how to do it for themselves? The message I wanted to give them was, “You are smart and capable enough to solve problems for yourself.” At the time, we lived in Portland, Oregon. From September to June, it never seemed to warm up so the kids spent a lot of time in the house and they often felt house bound. That is when most of the fights would break out. It was my job to herd the four of them out to our large front porch. The colder it was, the faster they were able to solve their problems! Tracey, my oldest, told me when she was six, “We are not angry at each other; we fight because we get bored.”

Now, there will be times when you will need to step in and take a firm hand. But so often, most parents take over when it would really be better to give the children the opportunity to learn how to get along for themselves. It is really important that we give children the message that they are capable of solving their own problems.

**Number seven: Children need to experience both positive and negative consequences to their behaviors.** Often, counselors and parents will concentrate on the negative consequences for children’s behaviors. “If you don’t do this, this is going to happen to you.” It is easy to set up all sorts of negative consequences for children without giving them the positive consequences.

In your daily life, would you go to work if all you got were negative consequences? Of course not. A paycheck is maybe the only positive thing about your job, so you show up and go through the motions. The more positives that you get, the more willing you are to put up with the negatives. You will take a little yelling, but you want something positive also.

In reality, life is full of both positive and negative consequences. To prepare for the real world, children need to have both. Balanced consequences might need to sound like, “Here’s what’s going to happen if you don’t, BUT here’s what’s going happen if you do.”

How do you motivate a child? Do you know what the most important thing for your child is? What your child wants from you, more than any other thing, is **your time**. Children would rather not have that toy or computer game if they could simply have your undivided time.

Individual, one on one time together tells the child that he/she is very important, valuable, loved and precious. So, if you’ve got two, three or four kids, each child needs time individually with each parent.

One of the things you can do as a reward is to say, “Let’s go swing.” I have a friend that calls it a “rainbow day” for a child. “If you clean your room for five days without me yelling, then we can have a rainbow day.” A rainbow day means we have an hour to three hours that we can do absolutely anything you want to do that isn’t too expensive.

Such as going to a movie, sometimes it is window-shopping, sometimes it's going to a park, but the child gets to choose what's important to him (within your acceptable limits). It is very important that the child choose the activity, because children will choose what they see as positive for them, what motivates them.

It's also important for the child to choose the negative outcome for their behavior. By the child choosing their own consequence, they will be less apt to see it as "You're doing this to me" and see it as a consequence of their own behavior. The child who chooses his own negative consequence will be choosing much better and stronger reinforcers than anything you could ever choose.

Natural consequences work the best. "If you leave your light on when you go to school, the light will disappear." "If you leave your toy in the driveway, the toy will disappear." A positive consequence can be earning back the things lost.

One word of caution, sometimes children will choose consequences that are too severe or unrealistic. In that case, you need only say, "That is too harsh. What else would help you remember to do. . .?"

**Number eight: Children are people too and need to be treated with respect.**

Children are not your servants, nor are you their maid. Children need to be treated as we would be treated. If I put my feet on your couch, and you didn't want them there, you'd probably tell me in a nice way, but firmly, "Please take your feet down. I just bought that white couch." And yet, what parents often do is scream at the child. "Please" and "thank you" go a long way in all relationships. How often have you told your child to get you something without saying, please? If they need to use the magic words, so do you.

Children have feelings too, and the words you use can cut deeper and last longer than a knife. You need to look at how your behaviors and words are affecting your child's feelings. If you treat your child with respect, then when your child "cops an attitude" with you (and he/she will), then you will be able to say, "How is it OK for you to talk to me that way when I have never treated you that way?"

**Number nine: Children need time alone with each parent.** One of the problems that many families have fallen into is doing everything as a family. Each child in your family needs individual time and attention with you, because that's where the child's ideas and the feelings of self-confidence and self-worth are born, in one-on-one relationships. If you are only doing activities and outings as a family, there is no sense in the child that I am of value as an individual. I may be of value as a part of a unit, but I'm not valuable as an individual. There is no model of a one-on-one relationship for them to use when they are grown. Each child needs time alone with you. The length of time and the frequency of the one-on-one's depend on the age of the child. The younger the child, the shorter the time but the more frequent it needs to occur.

I had a young couple come to see me. They were seniors at Fresno State and looking at getting married after graduation, but she was very unhappy with the relationship. He worked at TGI Fridays as the maitre'd. He was very popular and loved by everyone at school and at the restaurant. She complained that they were never alone, "His friends start showing up at 7 AM and don't go home until 11 PM. We never have time to be alone. We never do things together, just the two of us." As I listened, he shared that he was the middle child in a family of twelve. "We always did things together (what's the matter with her?)."

**Number ten: Children need your unconditional love.** Using conditional love with a child is the best way to get absolute obedience. The message of conditional love is, "If you don't do what you are supposed to do, mama won't love you." With conditional love, you can have your child obeying you perfectly. But, it will be at a price. Your child will have a low self-image and may become suicidal or homicidal.

Conditional love can be seen in parenting in many different ways. "Why can't you be more like your sister?" "I never wanted a girl." "You're just like your father." "You got a B. Why didn't you get an A?" Whatever the child does is never good enough. The child becomes responsible for all of the family, "If you don't behave, the people at church will think we are not good parents." In this way, the child becomes responsible for the family's acceptance in the community.

Conditional love is also found in the parents who favor one child over another. "Your brother played football and got good grades and now he is going to college (what is the matter with you, stupid?)." "Girl stuff is more expensive and she needs more than you boys. It costs us more just to feed you (it is your fault)." The opposite, unconditional love, NEVER uses putdowns, name calling, negative judgments, guilt trips, shaming or humiliation with a child.

Remember what I said about the stages of man. What a child is born with, and never loses, is the need for security. When you use your love as a weapon by threatening to withdraw it, you bring about obedience, but you also bring about insecurity, low self-image and fear. Children, raised this way, are afraid to fail. Being perfect is the only way the child knows to keep from being rejected. School becomes very hard. They have to do it perfectly or they give up and won't try at all. These children are either afraid to stand out or they become aggressive as a way of protecting their security, because they are afraid that someone will see their imperfections and reject them.

When the adult children of conditional love get married, they are afraid to speak out about emotional and/or physical abuse that happens to them or to their children. They do not protect the children, but rather attack anybody and everybody that might threaten their family security. They live in denial and refuse to see the signs of abuse. They will allow their mates to emotionally and/or sexually abuse their children. They will often try to get the family to take sides against the molester's victims. "It's not true; she is lying." They would rather live with the molester than to live alone.



# Conditional love is the deadliest Sin against children.

- Unconditional love does mean that there are consequences for your child's behaviors. It does mean that consequences are set fairly, consistently and enforced evenly.
- Unconditional love disciplines on principles, not on personalities.
- Unconditional love listens and accepts the child's feelings.
- Unconditional love measures itself by "What am I teaching my child when I do/say. . .?"
- Unconditional love allows for trial and error learning without recrimination.
- Unconditional love provides a safe and secure environment for the child to grow and learn.

The Ten Needs and Rights of Children should be a personal commitment made by every parent to their children. Good parenting affects all of us. A national commitment to good parenting could reduce both the prison and the mental health populations. Most mental health problems such as PTSD, Panic Disorder, Depression and Disassociation are environmental disorders which could be prevented and/or reduced by equipping our children with the emotional and coping skills that could and should be taught in childhood.

*M. K. Doc Downing Ph.D., LMFT*

[DocDowning@att.net](mailto:DocDowning@att.net)

<http://www.MyronDocDowning.info>

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