



Unconditional love, parenting, and eating disorders, by Verena Radlingmayr

Remember that first time you held this precious, tiny little wonder in your arms? Remember the feelings you had? Before you were wondering if you could be a good parent, there was this feeling of love, wonder, and so much love. It flowed freely, unconditionally. Your child didn't have to do anything to deserve this love. It was enough s/he was there.

Years later, you are facing an eating disorder, and you find yourself researching solutions to a problem that may lead to your child's death. And you are faced with powerful emotions that swirl around your insides. When a child struggles with eating, parents feel shame and guilt and wonder what they did wrong to make their child to suffer so greatly. What caused this tiny precious thing to grow into a child determined to destroy herself?



(<https://more-love.org/2018/10/29/free-mini-course-5-secrets-to-parenting-a-child-who-has-an-eating-disorder/>)



(<https://more-love.org/2018/05/22/does-my-child-have-an-eating-disorder-quiz/>)



(<https://more-love.org/professional-directory/>)

There is nothing you could have done differently. Yet there is something you need to learn. But before you can learn something it is necessary to forgive yourself. Forgiveness is powerful. And while we easily forgive others, we sometimes fail to grant the same kindness to ourselves. Forgive yourself. You didn't set out to hurt your child.

You are now open to make the adjustments and amends supporting your child's healing process.

Why is it your child has these issues in the first place? In my experience there is a connection between a child's universal rights and eating disorders.

Children's rights and unconditional love

Children's rights are universal. They include unconditional love, being accepted wholly, and being supported and defended. First and foremost is the right to be loved unconditionally.

Unconditional love means a child has the right to truly be as they are, without forcing themselves to be or do things that don't fit in order to be socially acceptable. While years ago unconditional love was a luxury for a few, it is now a basic requirement.

When your child has an eating disorder, they suffer from a distorted picture of themselves and lose the utter trust in and faith of being worthy of unconditional love. In their disorders, they believe that love is conditional and that they must look and behave according to what they believe will make them lovable. They believe that gaining the love they need to survive is conditional based on



(<https://more-love.org/2018/11/23/quiz-are-you-body-positive-plus-how-to-be-a-body-positive-parent-and-when-body-positive-is-not-actually-body-positive/>)

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external measurements of appearance and behavior. The child feels abandoned and torn apart.

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Parents can sometimes accidentally perpetuate these beliefs because they don't know better. They, too, have been taught that love is conditional. They, too, believe they must appear and behave a certain way to gain love. And so they don't realize that their conditional love for their child is painful.

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An eating disorder often is way of finding a solution to an impossible task – to gain love. It's a way to right what's wrong and get what they need most: their caregivers' love.

When a child become assured they will receive unconditional love without any adjustments in appearance or behavior, the eating disorder symptoms are no longer necessary to make the child feel safe in pursuing love because they know they have love unconditionally.

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We often think that growing up requires you to toughen up, that you need to play the game. Research shows that in babies born around 2000 and after, new brain areas have developed, and they affect the way we perceive ourselves and make us more perceptive of our environment. While we, the parents, were brought up to understand that love is conditional and based upon social acceptance, our kids' brains can't cope with the same conditions.

For example, it might not be socially accepted that your child gets angry, but if it is who she is, and as parents we must love her with (not in spite of) her anger. Don't say things like "Today is my birthday, so if I had one wish it would be for you to behave

and not have one of your outbursts.” That would be hurtful, and a condition of your love. It causes your child to feel unloved. As children we are hardwired to have our caregivers love – our survival depends on it. Can you remember the fear and despair you felt when you sensed that your own parents required you to ignore your own needs in order to gain their love?

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You have rights, too!

This is so important to know: unconditional love is your right, too. You deserve to be loved with all the flaws and faults and little eccentricities that make you the very special human miracle you are. That’s why you are allowed to forgive yourself. Because you were doing what you thought best and didn’t know about the importance to follow your heart and your instincts.

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As a parting gift I want you to have this tool to help you and your child along the way: close your eyes and remember the day your child was born. Let your system be flooded with the joy and love you felt. Stay in the moment until you feel the love in your heart, and from the tips of your hair all the way down to the tips of your toes. Then open your eyes and you will see. See the next step and then the next.

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By making the decisions from the viewpoint of love, you will be the support and guidance your child needs. Feel the emotions you had this very first moment you held your child and tap into them again and again. You are brave to follow your heart and you are exactly what your child needs.
