

The Need for Affirmation

By Marcia Neill

One of the first hurdles that my four children and I had when we first began homeschooling was their need for affirmation that I loved them even when they might not get 100% on their work. They had learned in their traditional school settings that they must get an A to be fully accepted. They began crying when I distributed their first Religion test. They were not crying because the test was so hard. My children were frightened about disappointing me. They expressed the fear of a loss of my love and approval if they did less than 100% on the test. They knew how I valued Religion and they desired to perform well. We quickly had to distinguish between doing their best, from getting 100% on tests. The two may often coincide, but doing their best was far more important to me than getting 100%. The children were home to learn, not to perform. Modern society has placed such emphasis on the material world and achievement as the mark of success. The struggle to succeed and to do their best builds character and may be of more value than straight A's.

Their awareness that the Lord is entrusting to them the growth of a child, a brother or sister of Christ, a temple of the Holy Spirit, a member of the Church, will support Christian parents in their task of strengthening the gift of divine grace in their children's souls. From "The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World"

by St. John Paul II

What a privilege it is to have God's children! St. John Paul II statement is a powerful affirmation of our role in raising our children. God has so blessed us parents with His children to nurture with the goal that they might share in eternal life with God our Father. The topic of "affirmation", inspired by an EWTN program "The Abundant Life" hosted by Johnnette Benkovic. Her guest speaker, Suzanne Baars, a practicing psychotherapist for 15 years is licensed in Professional Counseling, Marriage and Family Therapy, and Chemical Dependency Counseling. Ms. Baars' father, Conrad Baars wrote Born Only Once in which he writes that affirmation is a way of being and living, which brings real joy, fulfillment and peace. Quoting Mrs. Benkovic website, "In this gem of a book we find the true antidote to the many ills in our society - affirmation, as it brings peace and true happiness. Born Only Once presents the truth about the human person and his or her fundamental psychic need for affirming love, in order to develop into a mature adult."

On the program, Ms. Baars defined affirmation as that which is more than the verbal feedback; it is that all revealing look of the person that proclaims love and acceptance of who the other person is for themselves. It is this affirmation that fulfills the deep longings of the human heart and the intrinsic need of every person to feel loved and valued unconditionally.

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The struggle of homeschooling is not only the academic achievement of children, but their moral, social and emotional development. The topic for this particular program of the Abundant Life, the host Johnnette and guest Suzanne were discussing the importance of affirmation in the successful maturation of each person's emotional development. The lack of affirmation, as theorized by author Conrad Baars, is the root of the deprivation neurosis syndrome, so widespread in our utilitarian, self-seeking culture, where the most needy and most innocent of victims are given poor substitutes for authentic, affirming love.

Children so want our attention, that if they cannot get it through appropriate behavior, they will act out and demand our attention. I have at times, asked my children, "Is this an attention getting device, to distinguish between getting my affirming affection or my disapproving scowl. There is a difference, and children need to recognize when and how they gained my disapproval, how to say "I am sorry," to acknowledge their need for attention, and how to gain it by approved methods.

Affirming love is more than a positive comment; it is a positive reflective look in our eyes that acknowledges genuine pleasure and acceptance. We had adopted a new dog, Toby. Toby is more motivated by our pats and hugs and play with him, than he is by food. A new policeman was visiting recently, and I told him that I was hoping to get Toby to respond to treats to do tricks. Since the animal shelter volunteer had encouraged us to give treats frequently as a reward during our training period with Toby. He told me that the police dog trainers do not want the police dogs trained to respond to treats, but to the approving words of their trainer.

A while ago, I attended a workshop called "Light his fire" for wives in how to strengthen their marriages. This instructor believed strongly that all marriages could be saved and conducted a course that meet once a week for six weeks, and we were given homework to do each week. The first week, we were to tell our husbands that they were worth the investment of us taking this class. The second week, we were to compliment our husbands so much that if our best friend were standing there they would feel ill. The emphasis was on what we could do to improve our relationship. It was recognized that only we could change our own behavior, not that of our husbands. But in response to our positive behavior, we were to observe how our husbands would respond. The third week, we were to make an effort to create a welcoming home. The fourth week, we examined how we had accepted gifts from our husbands. There was a story about a young man who shopped at a department store lingerie counter, and about all the help that he had gotten from the ladies who were thrilled to assist him in getting the perfect gift for his wife. A few days later, these ladies were surprised to see the wife returning the gift,

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muttering “what was he thinking when he got me this?” She had completely missed the intent of the gift.

Over time, we allow the little dissatisfactions to become huge looming obstacles to our feeling satisfied. Complaints come easier off our lips. It becomes a habit to see the flaws rather than the accomplishments. We get a gift and find dissatisfaction with the lack of perfection. We miss the whole opportunity for affirming love. Our children need our affirming love to grow emotionally.

I think that it is true that some have mastered the art of positive feedback more than others. It is also true that our children desire our positive affirming loving looks and remarks often. More often than we may feel the need to express them. It is well documented that babies will die from maternal depravation. They need to be held to thrive. I am not sure how it begins, but those who have ten year olds or older, may ask yourself, when was the last time you hugged or kissed your child. Our teenagers need our hugs, loving glances and to be told how much was love and are proud of them in order to mature emotionally. God has blessed us with our particular children because in His infinite wisdom, we are the best parents for these particular children, and these children are the best for us.

Behaviors are changeable. We can deliberately focus on affirming those around us. It may amaze you, as it did me, how loving gestures bring joy, happiness and peace to our homes.