

# Seeking the Faith Quotient

## Unconditional Love

The most important emotional skill we can teach children is that God loves them unconditionally. Children who are able to understand and feel unconditional love from God and from the adults who care for them, are able to take risks, try new things, pick themselves up from failure, and to show love for others. These skills are the foundations for effective learning. No matter how high the IQ, if a child is afraid of failure, is afraid to try something new, learning will be significantly impeded.

God's unconditional love assumes that we will fail and disappoint. Unconditional love has a back-up plan for failure. It is like working with a net. God is there to love us and return us to Him. If you put old raisins into a glass of a clear carbonated beverage the raisins will sink to the bottom of the glass. But, then, something curious will happen. The carbonation bubbles will collect around the raisin and this will cause the raisin to float to the top of the liquid. Then the bubbles will pop and the raisin will sink and the process will start all over again. This is unconditional love. We sin, God forgives and brings us back to Him, and even while living in His love and forgiveness we sin some more and the process begins all over again.

Children need to know that God loves them no matter what. They need to know that there is nothing they can do that will cause God to stop loving them, and they need to know there is nothing they can do to cause God to love them more. They need to feel this love from their teachers and parents, also.

Unconditional love is an essential ingredient to a healthy self-perception. Self-perception is how a child views himself and his place in the world. A healthy self-perception is important to successful learning but the secular world has not found a good way to understand or teach it. The first tenet in self-perception is called self-concept and it asks the question "Who am I?" The secular view of this is to describe yourself: I am a female, a wife, a sister, a mother, a teacher, a writer, etc. However, if one of the descriptors changes through a change in circumstances than a person's self-concept is often adversely affected, also. A child who welcomes home a new sibling is now not only a daughter but a sister, too. This change can cause grief. A child with a healthy self-concept is not as bothered by life changes and can accept change more readily. Being loved, unconditionally allows you to not only cope with change but to embrace it as a good thing.

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Above all, love  
each other  
deeply,  
because love cov-  
ers over a multi-  
tude of sins.  
1 Peter 4:8a

Fear not, for I  
have redeemed  
you; I have sum-  
moned you by  
name;  
you are Mine.  
Isaiah 43:1

The reason why unconditional love is important to self-concept is that as Christians we have a faith-based view of self-concept. Our answer to the question "who am I?" is "I am a child of my heavenly Father." No matter what changes happen in my life this will always be true. I will always be God's child, I will always be forgiven, and I will always be loved. That love not only covers a multitude of sins, but a multitude of failures and a multitude of changes.

Do not underestimate the importance of teaching, modeling and practicing unconditional love with your students. It is easy to assume they know you love them. This assumption may very well be wrong. Children who do not have healthy relationships with their parents may not understand or feel unconditional love. Children who don't know their parents, whose parents may be emotionally or mentally unhealthy, may not know that they are loved

in this spectacular way. As teachers we need to be over the top, overt, and obvious about expressing unconditional love.

When we practice, to the best of our ability, unconditional love in our classrooms, we can expect change to happen. Children who know and feel unconditional love are able to love each other, are willing to take risks, and are better able to cope with disappointment or failure. The same unconditional love that covers our sins before God covers sins between each other. This love is essential to developing empathy and to forging relationships with others. Unconditional love creates a world where we know we are loved no matter what. When things are going well, we are loved. When the world seems to be against us, we are loved. When we are happy, angry, frustrated, or giddy, we are loved. This constant gives confidence and security. When we practice unconditional love we can expect that God will cause change in the lives of His children.

## Group Discussion

1. What is it like to live in a world without unconditional love?
2. What are the benefits of the safety net of unconditional love?
3. How does knowing that one is loved "no matter what" contribute to good emotional health?
4. How does unconditional love contribute to a strong self-concept?
5. Can you give examples, from your classroom, of unconditional love?
6. In what ways can you be more overt about expressing love to your children?
7. Do you have children who cannot accept or believe in unconditional love? What in their life might be the cause of this?

# Putting it into practice

## Teachers

When you think of God's unconditional love for you, what scripture verses come to mind?

Put into your own words what the phrase "God loves me, no matter what" means to you.

Think of three new ways that you can teach and model unconditional love for your students.

What changes in behavior do you expect will happen when you put these changes into practice?

List your observations of changes and bring them to the follow-up discussion.

## Putting it into practice

### Administrators

Remembering to integrate the faith can be a daunting task for beginning teachers. Look for evidence of faith integration in lesson planning and make suggestions when appropriate. It is easy for beginning teachers to assume that the misbehavior of children is somehow a personal thing directed at them. Give new teachers reminders of the need for unconditional love and of God's help in their process of loving and teaching their children.

It is easy for more experienced teachers to assume that children cannot be changed. If you find evidence of this kind of thinking remind your teachers of the power for change found in God's unconditional love. When appropriate, think about informal pairing of inexperienced teachers with the more experienced. One group can give advice to handle behaviors and the other can rekindle the excitement to see students learn and change.

Ask yourself if your teachers know that you love them unconditionally? How do you handle correction with your teachers? If you avoid correction, or do it in an abrupt way, you are not expressing unconditional love. Your teachers need to be reminded that they are valued by you.

Think about the self-concepts of your staff members. Do they know their gifts? Do they hear about their gifts from you? This is your opportunity to model unconditional love. If you take time to praise teachers, in specific ways, about what you admire and appreciate about them, this will lay a strong foundation in your relationship with each of them. Later, when the need arises to discuss a mistake, a failure, or a correction, the foundation you laid earlier will make this an easier process. They will be more able to accept a mistake and work on correction when they know that you have confidence in their abilities.

It is easy to assume that a talented staff does not need specific words of appreciation or support. It is easy to assume that you should just get out of their way and let them do what they are good at. However, if you take the time to point out strengths, specifically and privately, you will help to assure continued confidence and will also find you have helped your staff to become even stronger in their gifts. Find an opportunity in the next two weeks, to praise and appreciate each staff member either in a written note or verbally. Then stand back and look for change in their behavior.

## Assessing learning with follow-up discussion

These questions can be used for a follow-up discussion after teachers have completed classroom observations:

1. What changes have you made in your expression of unconditional love in your classroom?
2. What evidence do you have that your students understand that God loves them unconditionally?
3. What examples do you have that show that your students are learning to love each other unconditionally?
4. Have you seen a change in the climate of your classroom since our first discussion? Why or why not?
5. Do you have any evidence that the unconditional love you have taught and modeled in your classroom has made its way to the families of your children?