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Cultivating Self Worth in Kids: What it Means to Matter

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Approval from parents can feel like oxygen to a child over the age of 4, but this shouldn't be confused with praise or rewards. The sense of being seen, heard, cherished, recognized, and valued serve to make them stand a little taller and walk with more confidence. I still remember that feeling of just wanting my mother to notice and smile at me. Her accepting eyes were wonderful – like rays of sunshine that warmed my body. It is the warmth behind adult eyes that matter, they serve as the psychological mirrors upon which a child's sense of self is constructed.

What do our children see in our eyes? Do they see a strong invitation to exist and dwell? Do they see a twinkle, perhaps delight, feel a sense of acceptance not because of something they have done but simply because they are? There are many kinds of eyes we show our children, the ones of approval and disapproval, of frustration, anger, understanding, and love. What matters most to kids is the total number of loving or invitational messages they see along with the intensity of them. Our actual words convey less than our judgments do because our children watch and listen on many levels.

The most wounding and difficult thing for a child to see in their parent's eyes is a lack of desire or invitation to be close to them. When we want to be significant to someone and it is clear we are not, hurt and alarm unfold in its wake. I think most parents want to convey warmth to their child but wonder how they are supposed to do this when behavioural issues arise? They feel a responsibility to correct a child but also want to hang onto their relationship with them. Part of the problem is young kids only see the world through one lens at a time. If they see we do not want to be close to them due to behaviour, they have a hard time distinguishing this from how we actually feel about them. The fear of separation can actually bring a child's behaviour around but wounds them at the place of feeling like they matter to us.



One of the best disciplinary strategies that preserves the dignity of the child is when the *adult doesn't try to make headway in the moment*. When a parent and child are stirred up, this can be the worst time to make sense of what has happened. If a parent takes a moment to side step or put the conflict on pause, while acknowledging what isn't working, (e.g., hands aren't for hitting), it can buy them some time to get into a position of influence before proceeding. When talking to a child afterwards, they can draw out what was going on for them and convey expectations – all in the context of connection. Even as an adult, I can better hear what someone has to tell me when I still feel significant to them and are valued, in spite of what I may have done.

What role do praise and rewards have then?

A child over the age of four understands that they can influence whether or not a parent will see them as important and valued. They notice what makes a parent smile and can work at winning their approval in order to feel a sense of significance. They can work to get attention with all sorts of performances ensuing, from "look at me!!" to "do you like it?" The problem is when you have to work at being significant then *what you do becomes more important than who you are*. A child's sense of significance can get attached to performance, (e.g., sports, music, being nice, acting considerate), rather to who one is. Praise and rewards based on meeting expectations divorces mattering from a core sense of self and being loved unconditionally. A child can become enslaved to having to be good enough, kind, nice or funny so as to win the warm eyes of their parent. This only fuels insecurity and instability because they must work for significance and are not always assured of a successful performance.

A quest for significance is an enduring part of human nature. It can only be answered in a child when they have an adult with whom they are freed from having to work at getting their attachment needs met. We can still encourage a child when they need it and show delight in who they are – it just needs to get separated from what they do. For example, we can reply to their "look at me's" with – "you are proud of yourself!" or "tell me about what you are doing" or "what do you think about your picture or performance or activity?"

To put another way, I sometimes ask my children if they know why I love them? They look at me and with blank or confused faces and say, "I don't know why?" I hope they never feel there has to be a reason 'why' where matters of love and significance are concerned. They are times where we were meant to take things for granted and a sense of significance and being valued by someone was one of them.

So how can we convey to our children that they matter to us?

1. Through the expression of *warmth, enjoyment, and delight*, which convey we want to be close to them.
2. Finding moments and times to give them our *undivided attention* so they feel a *generous invitation* to be with us.
3. By guiding them in understanding their feelings and thoughts, *making room for their expression and matching words to experiences*.
4. Through telling stories and memories about them because they know *we remember the things that are significant to us*.
5. *Reading their needs and providing for them* without having to be asked so that they feel cared for.
6. *Collecting* them after periods of separation (e.g., morning time or after school), will convey we are their caretakers and they can trust in what is offered.

7. That when they fail to live up to our expectations, *we still convey an invitation to be with us.*

Our children's sense of self is built upon the invitation they receive from us to be close – it is the best gift we have to offer them. We cannot make them feel like they matter by propping them up with praise and acknowledgment. It is the day-by-day continual messages they see behind our eyes that influence how they come to see themselves. Children over the age of four should hunger for a sense of significance from their closest adult attachments. It is through caring for them that they come to realize what they mean to us and upon which their sense of self is formed. Children only start to feel they matter if they first have someone they matter to.



Copyright Deborah MacNamara, PhD, Kid's Best Bet – *Dr. Deborah MacNamara is a counsellor in private practice and on faculty at the Neufeld Institute. She works with parents, educators, child-care and mental health professionals in making sense of kids from the inside out. See www.macnamara.ca or www.neufeldinstitute.com for more information.*

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