

The Way You Are

Does unconditional love mean you accept people fully — without wanting them to be better? As a parent, does it mean you don't push your kids to do better? As a spouse, does it mean you don't encourage your partner to grow? As a manager, does it mean you accept ho-hum performance?

Recently I noticed myself thinking harsh, judgmental words about my son and his (lack of) homework. Lazy. Lame. Idiotic. Mostly I avoided saying these out loud, but there were a few, "Don't be so ____" phrases coming out.

This is absolutely not how I want him to see himself, and not how I want to think and feel about him. I want him to know he's loved no matter what, and that I value and respect him for who he is. I want him to do his best, but at the same time, to know he is a great person even when he messes up.

Perhaps this is partly due to my own self-perception of inadequacy. There's this little voice in my head saying, "You're not living up to your potential." I grew up hearing this often. And another, "If you did better, you'd deserve love and respect" — no one ever said this one to me... yet somehow I heard it. For most of my life I've felt inadequate, and that I need to prove myself.

On the one hand, this is motivating. At times, it's pushed me to push myself. On the other, it's told me to give up on what's too hard, to take shortcuts, and that real happiness lives outside of myself. I certainly don't want to pass that on.

Yet, I do have high expectations — I want my son to work harder and do better. And, I want him to know he's loved and perfect. Can those two coexist? When I asked Max (who's now 11) about this, he said that if I didn't push, I'd be like one of those parents who made excuses and acted like their kid was perfect even when they behaved badly.

“know he is a great person even when he messes up”



“YOU’RE NOT LIVING UP TO YOUR POTENTIAL”

I can see many of my clients and friends struggling with this too — especially with people who are “selected” (unlike our kids who arrive as a kind of “mystery package”). We want our husbands and wives to be more supportive, we want our friends to be just a bit more (or less) relaxed, we want our employees to be a lot more committed... yet we’ve chosen these people and made a commitment. Do we make that commitment based on an expectation that they’ll change to be what we REALLY want, or based on who they are?



What if we turn it around. How do I want my kids, my wife, my boss, to see me? How can they motivate me to grow and do better? If they see me as not good enough, will it help me be better — or will I shut down? If I feel real support and acceptance, will I be more motivated to do better – or will I be complacent?

I suspect that this distinction between acceptance/love and expectation is profoundly important for healthy relationships. I certainly know that I’m a lot more motivated to be and do my best when I know that the people around me are on MY side — that they’re supporting me for what I want, not for their expectations. So perhaps it comes down to letting go of the external expectation, and instead supporting each person in our lives to reach their own goals?

Could that work? How would it feel?
How do we start?

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