

What is unconditional love?

By Joan Hoogstad

Joan Hoogstad is senior faculty and a well respected and loved instructor of the William Glasser Institute-Australia. She was instrumental in getting recognition for training in Reality Therapy in Australia. Her book "We Are All Important" was reviewed in a previous Voice of Choice publication. Joan has retired but continues to write and teach the people in her retirement village about Choice Theory.

Unconditional love is one of the most important beliefs to practise and one of the most difficult things to do. Page 16 of my Collins Concise Dictionary – Fourth Australian Edition defines the word unconditional as unrestricted by conditions (absolute) and without limitations (pg 1616). The same dictionary explains love towards another person we are close to as an intense emotion of affection, warmth and fondness (page 868). It also mentions the word "regard". If we are able to accept that word as another, related meaning for love, then it becomes easier to use unconditional love towards others when we are talking about it in general terms.

If we accept what I have written so far then the next question is to ask ourselves what our behaviour would have to be if we put the words into practice. Recently I reread a book that I have had on my shelves for a long time. It is called "Dibs – In Search of Self". The book was written by Virginia Axline and first published in 1964. It has been reprinted many times. It made a profound impression on me when I read it. After reading it again a few months ago my perception of it changed dramatically because I saw it in a totally different light. I was even more impressed. It has a very important place in my quality world.

The book is about a five year old boy who appears to be very disturbed. The staff at his school are at a loss how to handle this child. He throws many tantrums, does not join in or approach other children. He resorts to baby talk and keeps a distance. Staff members are beginning to wonder whether the little boy is retarded (nowadays referred to as being intellectually disabled). The most difficult time is to help him get ready to go home with his mother. She takes him to school and collects him every day. A major problem is the end of the school day. He does not want to leave and throws severe tantrums. The staff are very caring and concerned. They are doing the best they can do.

Finally they talk to the mother once again and suggest therapy with Virginia Axline, a therapist who uses play therapy in her work. One of the teachers at the school wonders if Ms Axline is able to establish what the child's problems are. She is not convinced that the boy is retarded and believes that he needs professional help. I believe that Ms Axline can be accredited with highly developed therapeutic and counselling skills.

More than anything she has an outstanding understanding of unconditional love and what it means. Dibs as he is called begins his sessions in the playroom after his parents agree what the staff have suggested. He loves the hour he spends with Ms Axline every week. They mostly use a well equipped playroom in the centre. Dibs always wants to stay longer but Ms Axline insists gently that when the clock strikes the session has ended. She always gives the child 5 minutes warning.

At first there are big tantrums as he does not want to leave but slowly he learns to accept. In terms of Choice Theory he is learning new behaviours. Ms Axline is in his quality world. She has the skill of accepting which is a connecting habit and she models it.

Because she insists that the sessions end in time she is showing him trust. The underlying message to him is "I know that you can learn to accept that when the hour is up we have to stop". By doing that she also shows trust in her own ability. The child senses that. It is all part of creating the ideal environment. The wisdom behind it is "We can work it out together".

Dibs can do what he wants to do in the playroom and he works through his problems step by step. Ms Axline reflects what he is saying to her. It shows that she is listening. This is another connecting habit like trusting. It is also recognising him. Recognising is a form of respecting. It entails acknowledging. Connecting habits and recognising or acknowledging another person are vital because Ms Axline is saying to him that she is listening when they are together. The underlying message is "you are important". Ms Axline completely accepts Dibs. She practises all connecting habits.

My thoughts are that there is no need to refer to “unconditional love and acceptance” as a combination of words to explain the concept of unconditional love. I believe that the meaning of unconditional love already includes acceptance. That is exactly what Ms Axline was doing when she worked with Dibs. It gave the child a feeling of power. Through her behaviour Dibs learned to satisfy his need for power.

I believe that the need for power is vital as it is related to the survival need. To survive, people in the early stages of human development began to realise that in order to survive and get by they sometimes needed to cooperate. At other times it was important to compete.

Early man learned that it is easier to be in a group because tasks could be divided. Men hunted while women gathered wood for the fire, looked after the children and collected edible foods. This was done cooperatively

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because they understood that survival depended on it. In the evening when the fire was lit in a place out of the rain and wind each person competed for a spot near the fire and reached out to receive a share of the food. In order to do that people had to make sure to be there. They might not have had words for it but they understood.

They realised that life is about cooperation and competition and keeping the balance.

The clue is to know when to cooperate and when to compete. The need for power is a competitive need. The need for love and belonging is a cooperative need. In order for babies to survive they must connect and form a bond with their mothers while their mothers bond with them. Therefore the need for love is about cooperation.

That is how the needs developed over time. Although Ms Axline might not have known about the needs, she knew instinctively that Dibs was craving for love and a sense of self and importance which needs to be developed through unconditional love and recognition foremost by the family. Something went astray when Dibs was in the very early years of his life.

Ms Axline had the ability to accept and understand Dibs. The starting point was to connect with him. She did not focus on where she wanted him to be. She trusted that through his playing in the playroom he would work on what he needed to do on any particular day.

Apart from her unconditional love for him, she had the wisdom never to focus on what she wanted him to do or be. This is verified by a comment during one of his last sessions. Dibs turned out to be a very gifted child who could read at a very, very early age. Some of his final words to her were: “As you wanted it” and then he added “As I wanted it”. These words speak for themselves.

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The book is well worth reading. I believe that Ms Axline was ahead of her time. The therapy must have occurred in the fifties. Her ability as a therapist was her skill to allow him to make up his own mind and to follow his want.

If we think this through, it might occur to us that most problems in this world begin at the point where we believe another individual should be. The next step is to realise that this could be said about groups of people as well. How many groups in our present world believe that other groups and individuals should be where they think they want them to be.

The trouble is that they often try to make others think and act a certain way. In order to achieve that attempts are made to control through violence, arguments and warfare.

All of this is the opposite of unconditional love. It is not practising Choice Theory. Our attempts must be to work alongside one and another and figure out how to make the relationships work, how to practise unconditional love and recognise and understand the other person instead of competing to obtain the upper ground.

We have to realise that the other person or other parties are also trying to gain the upper hand. It will not work to wait for others to begin to understand, we must learn to be the models. We know Choice Theory and we can pave the way.

By practising the theory we are able to show that we love ourselves unconditionally. We know that the only person we are able to control is ourselves. If we truly internalise Choice Theory we are able to practise connecting habits towards ourselves.

We will become the models of unconditional love because the meaning of that word includes connecting habits apart from the dictionary's explanation of the two words. Choice Theory offers what everyone can do to make the world a better place.

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