

## **A High Standard of Excellence versus A Critical Standard of Perfection**

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As unconditional love contrasts with conditional love, a high standard of excellence differs from a critical standard of perfection in that the focus is on ones inherent value as opposed to ones behaviors and choices. Additionally, a high standard of excellence also models and instills into your child the ability to differentiate who he or she is from what he or she does. Their actions, behaviors and choices are not the determining factors that personal value is based upon. A person's value is a separate issue because it is inherent (Romans 3:30; 5:10-11).

Separating ones inherent value from his or her behavior is a critical point of focus (Romans 3:27). It serves as the foundation for the building blocks of healthy *objective thinking*, which enables a person to step outside of his or her situations, reevaluate poor choices or attitudes without being defensive, and insightfully consider new healthier options. But, as common sense dictates, before we can begin instilling the healthy self-view and thinking that our children need for emotional health, we must first be willing to examine our own lives (II Corinthians 13:5).

It is very difficult to instill a healthy sense of self into our children if we do not own those truths ourselves. This is how dysfunctional patterns are passed down from generation to generation—the parents instill the values of their predecessors, and pass those values on because they lack the insight into where the problems lie. This is commonplace in every family system because no one is perfect, we are all a work in progress.

As we examine ourselves, are we willing to apply the necessary changes to how we think, the choices we make, lives that we live so that we ensure we are in the process of conforming to objective truth (Psalm 26:2-3; I John 3:19-29; II John 4)? We cannot be assured that we are modeling the correct behaviors, attitudes and thinking if we do not base these attributes on what is true. Change must start with the mother and father because we establish the standards within our own family that our children will perceive as truth, even though it is only based on his or her own subjective interpretation. *"Do as I say, not as I do"* will not work if you expect your children to internalize a genuine, healthy understanding of themselves and the healthy core beliefs you are trying to instill. Because they are an extension of you, they will likely emulate your thinking, rationale and behavior.

Remember, this is a process that takes a lifetime; we are striving for excellence, not perfection! Likewise, our children are not looking for perfect parents. Instead, they are looking for consistent, transparent parents who are willing to be honest with themselves and others, and willing to set the example for what is expected of those under their influence.

So then, our challenge is to model a high standard of excellence that demonstrates to our children: *"I want you to pursue greatness, but to also remember that greatness is a process (Philippians 3:12). I will demonstrate flexibility and grace, and encourage you in your mistakes because failure is a great teacher. Failure does not define you, but what you choose to do with your failure does demonstrate your character (Romans 5:3-5). Do you choose to quit? Or do you choose to reevaluate the situation and strive forward (Philippians 3:13-14)?"*

This, in turn, enables your child to internalize a healthy flexibility within himself that reinforces objectivity and a willingness to learn from his mistakes. He will have more confidence in life and in dealing with the difficulties that life will bring to him. He will also be better equipped to say to himself: *"There is no advantage to beating myself up as I critically evaluate my mistakes. Instead, I have the ability to transparently rethink my mistakes, gain new insights and try again. My goal is not 'practice makes perfect' because I was not designed to be perfect (Romans 3:23). Instead, I strive for excellence and to be the best that I can be (Hebrews 12:1)."*

Furthermore, because your child understands and can differentiate his inherent value from his choices, your child will develop healthier cognitive flexibility and a non-personifying perception of failure, furthermore, he will be more willing to receive instruction from others too (Proverbs 1: 1-4). Insight and instruction will not be viewed as an attack on his personhood or self-value. Rather than becoming defensive, he will view the instruction as insights for personal growth (Proverbs 10:8, 14, 17; 12:1, 15).

Conversely, a critical standard of perfection, whether intentionally or not, establishes a rigid 'all or nothing' rule within a child that does not allow for mistakes. If one 'misses the mark,' he or she has failed. Because failure has been internalized and defined as anything less than perfect, he will often not try his best, or at all, because 'failure' is certain or inevitable. The critical standard screams: *"You're not good enough!"*

By no means are we trying to over-simplify a very complex issue, but for the purposes of this article, we are focusing on the components that we as parents *can change*; or better yet, avoid dealing with all together. So many other variables could possibly play into ones self-perception and negative self-beliefs. One example is how parents complain about their son or daughter's negative attitude, which we would like to think came from our spouse's side of the family! The fact is some elements may be inherited, but how do we as parents contribute to and *reinforce* those negative perceptions and patterns of behavior, which confirms the faulty self-view and makes it more concrete?

**Question:** When you are critical about your child's conduct, are you sure that your son or daughter can differentiate his or her inherent value from his or her behavior?

If you say: “*What the heck is wrong with you? Forget it, you’ll never get it*” “*Are you stupid or something, how many times must I explain it to you?*” “*Second place is the first loser.*” “*You never try hard enough; sometimes I think I am wasting my time with you.*” Or, “*so you got a 90% on your test. How come you couldn’t get a hundred?*” How does your son or daughter hear, perceive and internalize those critical statements? Does he or she know that you are confronting his or her behavior, attitude or poor choices, or is it possible they may be taking your criticisms as an attack against who they are and their inherent value?

It is very important to remember that what you mean to say and how the other person understands your words are two very separate issues. *Children are naturally critical of themselves.* If we, especially as parents, are not careful in how we choose to phrase our words (James 3:3-8), our criticisms can easily become, or reinforce, *negative* core beliefs. These negative core beliefs, in turn, will effect our child’s thinking, behaviors and feelings and thematically group into negative core values, which in turn serve as the negative and faulty foundation our children will build their lives upon.

Again, few parents intentionally bruise their child’s soul. Although there are circumstances where a parent lambastes his or her children or teases them—which is often a form of passive aggression, impatience or poor coping skills—so that he or she can release tensions, frustrations or stress. This only relieves one’s pressures temporarily, it soon returns. However, the damage and example that has been left behind is often, to some degree, unrepairable. We need to remember that our children, especially before puberty, are very literal and concrete—their sources of influence are limited. Within this small framework, they are attempting to gain a sense of mastery and confidence so that their world can continue to grow as they mature into adulthood. Mother and father have a tremendous influence over this process; they have yet to develop the ability to see their world abstractly as adults do, nor do they fully understand the complexity of communication and how to navigate the subtleties of personal interactions. What you instill has profound influence in his life, and how he defines self.

Every person, regardless of age, is affected by one’s parent’s opinion, insight, attitude, perception and temperament—whether it is good or bad. Again, the influence that we have over our children is powerful; there is no escaping our personal responsibility regarding what we inevitably instill into their lives, both the good and the bad.

When a mother and father, or any other primary caretaker, set the example of diligence and excellence (Ephesians 6:4), his or her children will follow—motivated by the *heart* (Proverbs 6:20-23; 13:1) as opposed to the stubborn obedience that is based on the fear of punishment (Proverbs 10:8, 13; 22:6). After all, is it not the desire of all parents to raise our children in wisdom so that they can grow up on a solid foundation and make the right choices in life?