

# The Most Important Relationship of All!

Christopher Uhl  
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In each of our lives the one relationship that is far more important than all others is the relationship that we have with ourselves! And it is my strong suspicion that few people in our culture live in a genuine state of self acceptance. The reason for this, I think, is that child-rearing and schooling practices along with contemporary societal values, condition us to believe that we are not truly loveable just for who we are. Lacking in self love, we spend our lives constantly striving to do more to win the acceptance of others as a condition for self acceptance.

Parents, to a significant degree, affect self acceptance through the way that they react to their children's actions. For example, when Dana and I take our daughter Katie (18-months-old at the time of this writing) to a restaurant, she examines every new thing that she comes in contact with—salt and pepper shakers, silverware, menu, water glass— with great curiosity. Rather than restricting Katie, we have taken to making the new things that she encounters readily available to her. And if she happens to sprinkle salt or pepper on the table, we express interest in the little specks that come out, perhaps even putting a few granules on her tongue.

Telling Katie that she shouldn't turn over the salt shaker, would make absolutely no sense to her. After all, she has no idea, at this point, what salt is or why it would be wrong to shake it onto the table. For her there is something on the table about the size of her fist that is solid and white with a shiny top.

Indeed, if we were to scold her for touching the salt shaker, we would be saying, in effect, "When you follow your own inclinations, you will mess things up and make people unhappy." This message would undermine her confidence in her own ability and authority to explore the world.

I have noted that when we accompany Katie on her little journeys of discovery in the restaurant and elsewhere, she treats the objects of her interest—even very delicate things—with care. So now, when she picks up new objects to explore, I ask myself, "Is there any significant long-lasting harm that will come to her or others if she explores this object?" Ninety-nine times out of a hundred there is no danger. Indeed, I now see that any discomfort I experience around Katie's explorations usually has nothing to do with keeping her safe; it is about keeping me safe—safe from the judgments of others and safe within the confines of my own conditioning.

Placing this story in a larger context, consider that by the time most children reach six-years of age, they have received thousands of prohibitions and scoldings delivered with phrases like:

- No, you must not do that!
- Don't you ever speak like that again!
- You should be ashamed of yourself!
- Get yourself under control!

Hearing these kinds of messages there is only one conclusion a child can reach—namely: There is something wrong with me! After all, it doesn't seem possible for her parents, who she depends on and who loom so large in her life, to be wrong. So it is that the child establishes inside her psyche her very own self critic. In so doing, she becomes self regulating, no longer needing her parents to keep her in line. In effect she becomes a "good girl" which is to say a "people pleaser."

Of course, it is necessary for parents to establish some boundaries when caring for children, but I believe that it is possible to establish so many boundaries that parents end up

doing more harm than good. Specifically, in the case of Katie, I worry that if we corral her with a multitude of unnecessary prohibitions, she may, due to her fear of losing parental love, lose her precious connection to her own inner goodness and light and, in effect, abandon herself, as so many of us seem to have done in the modern era. When this occurs, it is especially tragic because it is the quality of this precious relationship that each of us has with ourselves that determines the richness and warmth of all the other relationships in our lives.