



Part one: Control is fear, freedom is love

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A pathway to healing

My inspiration for this article was three things:

1. Several interactions with my eldest, which involved me coaching him through the benefits of letting go of control and helping him 'go with the flow'.
2. A conversation with my naturopath, who said to me 'Emma, there's no point in blaming yourself but maybe now you might be able to heal the issues regarding control in your family...'
3. A conversation with my supervisor who gave me a book called *Unconditional Parenting: moving from rewards and punishments to love and reason*, by Alfie Kohn. This article is based on that book and may provide you with a few lightbulb moments, like it did for me.

Just a warning though, if the notion of unconditional parenting is new to you, it may take up a fair bit of brain capacity. So if you're still sleep deprived or struggling with any of the other plethora of parenting jobs there are to do with a young child, then maybe save this article for when you're feeling up to an extra challenge. Also, the last thing I want to do is provide more parenting advice, so if you can see this article as fruit for thought, rather than than the former. So, if you are up to pondering a new concept, and learning a bit about a different pathway, away from punishment and rewards and towards healing and love, then read on...

The breadth of this topic has required me to separate this article into two parts. This first part describes conditional parenting, and why we do it. It introduces the concept of unconditional parenting, but more of that to follow in Part Two.

Control is fear

What I'm about to say may be a bit emotionally evoking, thought provoking and even a bit controversial: through control and conditional parenting - we may be, inadvertently or not, teaching our kids that they are only loved, or only worthy when they behave in certain ways. Kohn (2005) contends that as parents we 'conditionally' parent in order to serve our own interests. Namely, by using the control and power that we have (with our age and experience and position in the family) we get our children to do things that make our lives easier, or to allay our own fears. We do this by either withdrawing or providing our love and attention according to the child's behaviours i.e. if

you're obedient I'll reward you with gifts, or if you're disobedient I'll withdraw my love via punishment such as putting you in your room, or taking away privileges. In contrast, unconditional parenting is about providing love as a gift, which is the child's right, rather than a privilege.

Unconditional parenting and conditional parenting compared

So to give you an insight into unconditional parenting (covered further in part two of this article), the two concepts are summarised below:

	Unconditional	Conditional
Focus	Whole child (reasons, thoughts, feelings)	Behaviours
View of human nature	Positive/balanced	Negative
View of parental love	A gift	A privilege to be earned
Strategies	Working with (problem solving)	Doing to (control via rewards and punishments)

What does conditional parenting look like?

According to Kohn (2005), conditional parenting looks like withholding love - for example, emotionally withdrawing, physically withdrawing, and even the use of 'timeout'. Timeout was, a popular parenting discipline technique when my boys were younger. I remember using timeout when my eldest was 18 months old - to try to address his behaviour of pushing other children. I don't think it worked, I think it was a phase he had to pass through. I don't think he would have made the connection between the consequence of timeout and the pushing behaviour. Rather, by isolating him in his room, he probably just felt rejected, excluded, and unsupported in the little tribulations he was going through. Timeout was still intended to cause him some sort of pain to deter him from repeating the behaviour - it is still a punishment and enforced punishment is about control.

Rewards that are designed to encourage desired behaviour are still about control and compliance. It's still about making the child do what we want them to do. This could look like the use of sticker charts (another popular tool when my boys were younger), even excessive praise when the child achieves the desired behaviour. It can result in the child conditionally achieving i.e. only achieving when they know a reward is available - so it's extrinsic (enforced by others) motivation, rather than intrinsic motivation (from their own desires and values). Kohn believes that *'the more people are rewarded for doing something, the more likely they are to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward'* (Kohn, 2005, p.33).

The downsides of conditional parenting

Kohn suggests that by providing conditional love, i.e. care and attention based on what the child does, is that the child *'learns to disown the parts of themselves that aren't valued. Eventually they regard themselves as worthy only when they act (or think or feel) in specific ways'* (Kohn, 2005, p.20). Essentially we may end up teaching our kids to love *themselves* conditionally as well.

If we look at ourselves for a moment, we may start to see sign of loving our *own* selves conditionally i.e. "I'm only worthy of a break when I've done the washing" or "I only deserve new clothes when they approve of me". It's sad but true that many of us have probably been raised this way, either inadvertently or not. The downside for us is that by continuing to do what we've always

done, means there's little opportunity to do what we want to do given the time, energy and thought required for change. We probably don't mean to be parenting as we were parented, in fact many of us make a concerted effort to do quite the opposite - either way, we tend to be more concerned about our remedying own hang-ups, rather than concern for the child's experience. Kohn suggests that what matters most is the message our kids *receive*, not the one we are sending. For example, when we repeatedly ask our kids to do their homework are we more concerned about how we would feel if they failed a test, rather than how much pressure we might be putting our kids under to achieve?

So why do we use rewards and punishments then?

Because it works! At least initially. It makes life easier for us when the kids 'just listen' or 'just do what they're told' or 'don't talk back', and it is often reinforced by others "*Your child is so polite and well-behaved*". It is no wonder we would prefer to have control over our children like we do other aspects of our lives. However, Kohn would say that this ease comes at a price and is short-lived.

Although conditional parenting, produces desired behaviours in the short term, studies show that it is detrimental in the long term - that kids, when they're older, are more likely to feel rejected and as a result, resent their parents. As parents that's exactly what we don't want! One of the most common fears I hear from my clients is "*I'm worried that I'll f*** [the child] up*". It can help clients to hear that no matter what we do, our child isn't going to be perfect - knowing this can help take the pressure off! All we can do is our best, and continue to reflect on ourselves and that will flow through to our parenting. In order to do this it's important to understand what's going on for us, what's at the heart of the reasons why we want to enforce control. Here's a personal example...

Healing starts from within

On a recent family holiday my boy struggled with the change in routine and environment. I imagine he must have felt uncomfortable not feeling the level of predictability and control that he normally has, and therefore he was easily emotionally triggered if things weren't as expected. One of his tantrums was because it started raining, there was no shelter we could take, and he couldn't stand the smell of his wet clothes. My instant reaction was anger that he didn't handle his emotions in front of others. So I just wanted to flee. I walked away to cool down. Arguably a safe response, however Kohn would probably argue I rejected my boy (in his time of need) by doing so. The tantrum got worse.

After the tantrum subsided, I asked him "What options do you have?" he said "Nothing!". I said "Ok when you can't do anything, what options do you have?". Relief washed over his face as he said "I just keep it like it is". His realisation that he didn't need complete control over the weather, and that it might be uncomfortable for a bit, gave him a sense of agency in himself - i.e. you always have your attitude to fall back on.

On reflection, I realised that 'what was going on for me' was that I was afraid that his tantrums will get worse and more frequent, and that I won't be able to figure out a solution, and I won't be able to handle it. That's a lot of fear, which instigated my anger and flight stress response. I can take some responsibility in that my parenting, which has been fairly controlled, has caused him to feel insecure in new environments and contribute to his sense of "I can't handle it" if things aren't how he expects or wants. However, I also see that nature has a part to play, my other boy is the complete opposite personality yet my parenting hasn't been that different. I'm not blaming myself but rather I see myself as a starting point for healing in the family. That means looking at myself.

So I tried something different the other day. We were at school drop off and I was in a rush (a no-no according to Kohn), my boy's bag was stuck in the boot and he couldn't pick it up. Usually I'd get annoyed and say something like "Are you serious?" (due to my fear of the consequences of my being late), which would then result in a response like "I can't do it!" and probably an emotional outburst. Instead I decided that I wouldn't be in a rush, and that my relationship with him is

paramount. I said “Is it stuck?”, which meant he looked at how it was stuck and figured out by moving part of the boot tray that he could release his bag. I didn’t need to do anything - he did it all himself.

What is going on for me?

Kohn believes that the ‘*dominant problem with parenting in our society isn’t permissiveness, but fear of permissiveness*’ (Kohn, 2005, p.49). So as parents, our fears e.g. that being permissive may lead to the child running riot or having control over us, means that we instil behaviours such as becoming excessively controlling. However this behaviour can produce exactly the behaviour we are fearing i.e. fear breeds control, which breeds fear and control. Some other fears that Kohn (2005, p. 108) suggests that parents suffer from are:

- Fear or parental inadequacy - feeling incompetent within ourselves or compared to others.
- Fear of powerlessness - being afraid our kids will take us for a ride.
- Fear of being judged - that others might ridicule or reject us because of our children’s behaviours.
- Fear of the child’s safety - that we wouldn’t be able to cope, or we’d be judged if our child was hurt.
- Fear of babying - that our child won’t grow up to be independent.

I would suggest one other fear - a meta-anxiety - which is the fear of not being able to cope. This fear coupled with a central belief that ‘I am completely responsible for my child’s behaviour’ - creates a huge amount of pressure to do anything and everything to prevent the fear from coming true. It can help take the pressure off, and therefore dull the fears, and positively influence our behaviours, if we can reframe this belief to something more flexible “*With support I will be able to cope. I play an important part in my child’s behaviour by how I behave, and there are many other influences too*”.

What are some alternatives?

If we really think about why we had children, and what we want our children to be as adults, we’ve probably already ticked the boxes. For me, I want children who are caring, assertive and vulnerable, and confident in their imperfection. Kohn (2005) would say that by keeping this bigger picture in mind, helping our children grow into compassionate and psychologically healthy people, it becomes clear how hard that is to do on a ‘diet of love withdrawal’ or any sort of punitive consequences. Rather, some generous doses of freedom (in a responsible way) breeds love and connection.

We want to teach ourselves (and our kids) that our value as human beings is unique and intrinsic to ourselves, i.e. that our value is not dependent upon our performance as the perfect parent (or child). Therefore we can see our own (and our children’s) mistakes or obstacles as a temporary setback - opportunities for reflection and learning - rather than as a permanent failure to beat ourselves up over.

What next?

If you want impartial, confidential and professional support along your parenting pathway then PND Wellington has Counsellors to help you on this journey. PND Wellington now offers couples counselling for couples wanting to work better as a team in order to parent in the best way they can. Our fees range from free to low-cost depending on the level of experience of the Counsellor.

I'm Emma Heaney-Yeatts, the Lead Counsellor at PND Wellington. I have two young boys and my own experience with postnatal distress. I'm a qualified counsellor and full member of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors. I see clients in Johnsonville and Mana.

If you want to find out more, contact us using the details below:

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References

Kohn, A (2005). *Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason*. Atria Books: New York



Part two: Control is fear, freedom is love

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Part Two of this article looks at what unconditional parenting looks like and how to practise it if you're interested. Like I said in Part One, if the notion of unconditional parenting is new to you, it may take a bit of time and effort in order to learn and practise it. So if you're still sleep deprived or struggling with any of the other plethora of parenting jobs there are to do with a young child, then maybe save this article for when you're feeling like an extra challenge.

If you are up to pondering a new concept and you want some fruit for thought, you might like to learn a more about unconditional parenting - a pathway that veers away from punishment and reward based love to unconditional care and attention. This article is based on the book *Unconditional Parenting: moving from rewards and punishments to love and reason*, by Alfie Kohn.

Unconditional parenting and conditional parenting compared

So just to recap, these two concepts are summarised below:

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Principles of unconditional parenting

Kohn (2005) gives the following principles of unconditional parenting. I'd also add another principle (at the top), which is to look after your body, mind and spirit first. Then we can better give to our children.

1. **Be reflective** - with your own parenting.
2. **Reconsider your requests** - before searching for a method to get kids to do what we tell them (there are reasonable requests when it comes to safety and respect), we could take the time to re-think the value or the necessity of our requests.
3. **Keep your eye on your long-term goals** - is your vision for your children to be something along the lines of being caring, assertive, respectful, vulnerable, compassionate? Keeping your eye on the bigger picture helps to get over the small bumps along the way.
4. **Put the relationship first** - making absolutely sure that doing anything controlling, is worth the strain on relationship.
5. **Change how you see, not just how you act** - seeing 'infractions' as not requiring enforced consequences but as a learning opportunity to work through with your child.
6. **R.E.S.P.E.C.T** - not assuming that just because we're older that we know their feelings and reasons for behaviours any better than they do.
7. **Be authentic** - show our kids that we are real people (of course sharing what is age appropriate only) - not pretending to be more competent than we are, and apologising when we make mistakes.
8. **Talk less, ask more** - recognise what the child needs (the source of the problem), and helping them feel safe enough to tell us about it. *'It's when we're not entirely sure what the child will say, and when we're open to more than one response, that a question is most likely to be beneficial'* (Kohn, 2005, p.129). Even saying nothing and hugging and holding can be more beneficial than talking too much or too little.
9. **Keep their ages in mind** - think about their level of understanding of what you say and do - keeping our expectations in line with their age and stage.
10. **Attribute to children the best possible motive consistent with the facts** - children construct a theory about their own motives based in part on our assumptions about their motives, and then act accordingly. If we assume the worst about the intentions behind their behaviour it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. However if we assume the best, it can create an auspicious rather than vicious cycle (Kohn, 2005). We could assume the child just doesn't have the skills and knowledge or systems in place to know a safer or more respectful behaviour. We can provide information to assist them to make safer choices.
11. **Don't stick your 'No's' in unnecessarily** - having a good reason to say no (e.g. respect or safety issue). Our wants count too, which is grounds for negotiation, but being mindful we're not restricting our kids freedom in the process.

12. **Don't be rigid** - having general rules, rather than rigid ones. When parents differ on rules, as long as we resolve our differences respectfully, it's ok to show flexibility. Too much consistency between parents can, surprisingly, come across more like a combined 'force' to our kids, rather than a support team.
13. **Don't be in a hurry** - we become more controlling when time is short or when we're in public - a combo is the worst! Kohn suggests that rather than changing the child's behaviour, it usually makes more sense to change the environment.

What about praise?

The question that may help us to ask before offering praise is: *"Are we trying to manipulate or are we genuinely giving attention and encouragement that the child needs to feel unconditionally positive (rather than our for approval of specific behaviours only)?"* (Kohn, 2005, p.158). As Kohn says *'Rather than using praise, even thank you, which focuses on specific behaviours - and may lead to children to feel that they are loved only under certain conditions - we need to help them think about the way they are and the way they want to be'* (Kohn, 2005, p.158).

Ways to practise unconditional parenting

The following table describes some ways in which to practise unconditional parenting.

Instead of saying...	Try...
I like the way you...	Saying nothing
Good drawing! I love those pictures!	Describing, rather than evaluating, what you see: 'Hey there's something new on the people you just drew. They've got toes'
You're such a great helper!	Explaining the effects of the child's action on other people: 'You set the table! That makes things a whole lot easier for me'
That was a great essay you wrote	Inviting reflection: 'How did you come up with that way of grabbing the reader's attention right at the beginning?'
Good sharing, Michael	Asking, rather than judging: 'What made you decide to give some of your brownie when you didn't have to?'

Source: Kohn (2005), p.157.

What about boundaries and safety?

Kohn (2005) would say it's less about the boundaries, and more about the attention and love we give to our children. It's also about giving reassurance that we still care even if the child has behaved out of character - by giving them the space and support so they can figure out how to make things right. Also natural consequences of behaviours are effective ways of learning (in safe circumstances of course) e.g. if a child doesn't wear his or her jacket in the rain they'll naturally learn that they get wet. Kohn would say that yes kids tend to do better with some predictability in

their lives, but to be conscious of overdoing it. It may help to ask ourselves; “Does what your kids come to expect, make sense to them?”.

Is it too late?

No! Kohn (2005) would say ‘*What distinguishes truly great parents is their willingness to confront troubling questions about they’ve been doing and what was done to them*’ (p. 115). It may help to look at what we needed most from our caregivers when we were children, what helped and what hindered, and what our frustrations were. Perhaps looking at how to treat our children how we’d preferred we’d been ourselves. Also asking yourself ‘*is it possible that what I just did with them has more to do with my needs, my fears, and my own bringing, that with what’s really in their best interests?*’ (Kohn, 2005, p.115).

Being a team with your partner

In addition to Kohn’s suggestions above, I would reiterate that looking after your own physical, emotional and psychological needs first is paramount - in order to provide for others. Secondly, being together with your partner (or support person) is essential so that you don’t feel alone, but rather feel like a team. This also means you come across as a support team for the child with love and consistency. Strained partnerships can be a contributing factor to post and antenatal distress, and vice versa - PND can put strain on relationships. This is why PND Wellington is now offering couples counselling for couples who want to work better as a team, while they are parenting their children.

What next?

If you want impartial, confidential and professional support along your parenting journey then PND Wellington has Counsellors to help you. Our fees range from free to low-cost depending on the level of experience of the Counsellor.

I’m Emma Heaney-Yeatts, the Lead Counsellor at PND Wellington. I have two young boys and my own experience with postnatal distress. I’m a qualified counsellor and full member of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors. I see clients in Johnsonville and Mana.

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References

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