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Last week, I wrote about giving our children unconditional love by encouraging more than praising. Receiving unconditional love as a child is extremely important to a child's emotional development. In addition to encouraging our child, we must learn to express our love to her even when she has hurt, disappointed or embarrassed us. It may seem odd that I mention embarrassment, but many parental reactions to children's behavior are because of a parent's embarrassment.

In unconditional love we respond to the pain we feel in love rather than in anger. That is very difficult because we are not uninvolved bystanders. Where our children are concerned, our emotions go into overdrive.

Let us look at an example of an unwed teen daughter who tells her parents that she is pregnant. First, we think of the daughter we knew yesterday—the one who had a scholarship to college and was planning to major in something that she loved. We see all our dreams for her (college, a good job, falling in love, marrying and, much later, giving us grandchildren) in disarray.

Next, we see a child coming into our lives at what does not seem to be a good time. We realize that our plans to enjoy our “empty nest” will be replaced with caring for and supporting our grandchild and daughter both financially and emotionally until she can get on her feet.

Finally, we are faced with the fact that this child was conceived out of wedlock. That may mean that our daughter is in pain because the father has left her. It may mean that we are upset that she has not followed the guidelines we tried to teach her. And we are probably embarrassed about what people are going to say. Yes, our emotions are involved, and we are in pain.

Our daughter is also in pain, and her emotions are over the edge. Unconditional love acknowledges her pain, listens to her concerns and responds in a way that shows love and support. It means putting her feelings first. Most importantly, it means assuring her that we love her no matter what she has done or will do in the future.

We can never love as unconditionally as God loves us, but we can reach for that kind of love. It will make all the difference to our children for the rest of their lives.