

Unmet Childhood Needs and your adult relationships

■ by Linda Ostlund, MA, LCPC



Are unmet childhood needs affecting your relationship?

Unmet childhood needs are needs of unconditional love that were not met when we were children. Is this a concern? Should we try to resolve them? The answer is: Yes.

Why resolve unmet childhood needs?

We are at our most vulnerable as a child within the context of our family, and then as an adult in our intimate relationships. Unmet childhood needs from the past will integrate into our present intimate relationships. The effects of unmet needs show up in the relationships we are most vulnerable. If not dealt with, the cognitive message is: You are not worthy of being loved. So, you distance yourself from loving relationships of any sort. You might be reluctant to let anyone see you for who you are because “who you are” does not feel good enough to be loved. Yet, love is a core need—that is how God created us. How can we meet our need for love within relationship?

How do we resolve unmet childhood needs?

As Christians, the work we need to do can fit into two important spiritual changes.

1. **Change the cognitive script** from those childhood messages which make us feel defeated to the messages from our Creator. Changing the cognitive script to what God says meets our needs for unconditional love.

We say: “She’s so critical—I can’t do anything right! My dad was like that—I could never please him.”

God says: “The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him.” (Psalm 103:13). The Apostle Paul said: “I’m not trying to win the approval of people, but of God...” (Galatians 1:10).

We say, “He never listens to me—he doesn’t care how I feel—nobody cares how I feel! My parents never listened to me either—I never was heard—my feelings did not count.”

God says: “The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry” (Psalm 34:15). The psalmist said of God: “I love the Lord because he hears my voice...because he bends down to listen.” (Psalm 116:1, 2).

2. **Change our focus** from looking to our present intimate relationships to meet all our needs for love—to looking to God and realizing his unconditional love for us and allowing him to meet all our emotional needs.

How unmet childhood needs affect intimate relationships in adulthood

If we have not addressed those unmet childhood needs, we likely will choose intimate relationships, at least on an unconscious level, that give love and comfort but push our emotional buttons - causing conflicts, confusion, disagreement, and arguments. It often comes, therefore, as a surprise that the underlying cause of such disagreements and arguments are partners’ unmet childhood needs.

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Conscious and unconscious relationship lists

We all have a conscious list of what we are looking for in our intimate relationships. Is he or she attractive/romantic? Financially stable/ambitious? Responsible/dependable? Spiritual/religious? Adventurous/fun to be with?

What many of us do not realize, however, is that we have an *unconscious* list as well. That unconscious list are needs we never received as a child: emotional attachment, security/safety, belonging, connection and fulfillment.

Gravitating towards relationships that feels familiar

Now in our adult relationships we find ourselves gravitating towards love that feels familiar and comfortable. This is not about an exact replica of the relationship you had with father or mother, just something close; for example, we find ourselves in a relationship with someone who is strong yet also critical like our father. Or nurturing yet somewhat passive like our mother; a partner who is fun but emotionally unavailable.

If as a child, your parents did not implement emotionally healthy boundaries, you may feel as if you are being smothered, neglected, or abandoned in your present relationship. Without emotionally healthy boundaries growing up, you will tend to gravitate towards people that are similarly passive and who have a difficult time saying no to you.

We need to understand, however, that everything our parents did was from one of two places: their love for us or the unconscious patterns that their parents passed down to them. All of us, regardless of how wonderful our parents were or weren't, have some needs that went unmet or that weren't met enough.

Meeting all our emotional needs

The unconscious longing in intimate relationships is for the other person to meet those emotional needs of love that never were met in childhood. Is this a realistic expectation? If we are honest with ourselves, the answer is: No! Why? It's because we are all flawed, human, have limitations, and can never truly meet or resolve ours or someone else's unmet childhood needs for love. God tells us that all of mankind is sinful— *"For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins."* (Romans 3:23, 24).

So, what's the solution to meeting all our emotional needs? The Bible says, *"God is love..."* (1 John 4:8). If we invite God into our relationship, he tells us, *I have loved you with an everlasting love; with unfailing love, I have drawn you to myself* (Jeremiah 31:3). When each partner places their emotional foundation in the God of love, the cognitive scripts of unmet childhood needs can be changed by embracing God's eternal and unchangeable love. Each person in the relationship becomes *adopted as Gods' own children who can call him, 'Abba, Father'* (Romans 8:15). Finally, the Bible proclaims, *"See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are"* (1 John 3:1).



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All our emotional needs are met in the God who is love. ■

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