

Why Children Need to Be Loved

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I have argued elsewhere that children have a moral right to be loved. Mhairi Cowden challenges my arguments. Among other things, Cowden believes that children do not need to be loved. In this paper, I explain why Cowden's arguments fail and I offer additional evidence for why children need to be loved.

Keywords: rights; children; love

Introduction

In "The right of children to be loved" (Liao 2006b), henceforth RTBL, I argued that

(1) Children, as human beings, have rights to the primary essential conditions for a good life.

(By 'primary essential conditions,' I mean certain goods, capacities and options that human beings need whatever else they might need in order to be adequately functioning individuals who can pursue a good life – for brevity, I shall drop the clause 'who can pursue the good life.')

(2) Being loved as children is a primary essential condition for a good life. (That is, children need to be loved in order to be adequate functioning individuals).

(3) Therefore, children have a right to be loved.

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Cowden (2012) challenges the idea that children have a right to be loved. Among other things, Cowden believes that (2) is false. In this paper, I shall explain why her arguments fail. Cowden does make a number of other claims. Owing to space, I shall only briefly address some of them. Before continuing, I would like to thank Cowden for engaging with my work and for the opportunity to elaborate on some of my thoughts in this area.

Cowden's Challenge

Most people find (2) to be obviously true. Given this, and owing to space, I did not attempt to provide a full defense for (2) in RTBL. However, to provide some support for (2), I did briefly allude to one strand of scientific research, which focuses on the negative effects of lack of love on a child (Liao 2006b, pp. 423-424). As I explained, because it would be unethical to conduct studies of this kind by performing controlled experiments on human beings, researchers in this area have investigated this issue in other ways, ranging from a) naturalistic studies of children in institutions, to b) studies of monkeys in laboratories, to c) clinical studies of certain growth disorders of children in their own homes, and d) to recent neuroscientific studies in animals.

Cowden claims that these research programs (a-d) do not support (2). Cowden (2012, pp. 4-8) first borrows a set of distinctions made by Michael Rutter (1972) between acute distress from loss, experiential/nutritional privation, and bond privation. Cowden then argues as follows:

- (i) The empirical studies show that acute distress from loss, experiential/nutritional privation, and/or bond privation cause children to have hampered developments.

- (ii) For the empirical studies to support the claim that children need to be loved, acute distress from loss, experiential/nutritional privation, and/or bond privation must be equivalent to love.
- (iii) But acute distress from loss, experiential/nutritional privation, and/or bond privation is not equivalent to love.
- (iv) Therefore, these studies do not support the claim that children need to be loved.
- (v) Therefore, children do not need to be loved.

For example, with respect to acute stress, Cowden writes, “It is clear that separation from a ‘love-object is different from a lack of love” (p. 5). Or, with respect to experiential/nutritional privation, Cowden writes, “the necessary visual, physical and experiential stimulation can be given by someone who is not the primary care-giver or parent. This seems to indicate that the experiential privation affecting physical development can be separate from the formation of attachment and bonds between child and care-giver” (pp. 6-7). Or, with respect to bond privation, Cowden argues that “bonds may not be the same thing as love; it is generally recognized in attachment theory that attachment is not synonymous with love or affection” (p. 8).

Two preliminary points. First, Cowden relies heavily on Rutter’s work to suggest that the empirical studies do not support (2). However, Rutter’s work in fact supports (2). Rutter’s chief complaint (1972, p. 241) is that the term ‘maternal deprivation,’ which was widely used in the 40s to 60s, places too much emphasis on ‘deprivation,’ which implies a loss (of, e.g., a love-object). But Rutter believes that what should instead be at issue is lack of affection in homes. As Rutter says,

Several independent studies have all shown that the delinquency rate is much raised when the parents divorce but it is only slightly above expectation when one parent dies. This suggests that it may be *the discord and disharmony* preceding the break (rather than the break itself) which led to the children's delinquency. . . . Our own studies suggested that both *active discord and lack of affection* were associated with the development of antisocial disorder but the combination of the two was particularly harmful (my italics) (p. 247).

In a study comparing Romanian children who came to the UK to be adopted and UK adopted children, Rutter (1998) observes that even after adoption, the Romanian children still had certain cognitive deficit, and Rutter hypothesizes that the deficit "was likely to be a consequence of gross early privation, with *psychological privation* probably more important than nutritional privation" (my italics). Given that Rutter believes that active discord, lack of affection and psychological privation are responsible for the delinquency in these children, Rutter's work supports (2).

Second, Cowden's discussions of the empirical studies are at times misleading. For instance, Cowden (2012, pp. 4-6) targets Spitz's studies from the 40s and argues that the problem with these studies is that the children did not have sufficient human interaction, adequate provision of toys, and so on, rather than lack of love. However, Cowden fails to mention that subsequent studies have controlled for these factors.¹ Similarly, in her discussion of the studies of monkeys in laboratories, Cowden focuses on the most extreme of such experiments, i.e., Harlow's 'total social isolation' experiments, and Cowden argues that such experiments "show the extreme nature of experiential privation, but as it is concerned with highly specific sensory stimulation, it is of limited application to questions about the effects of lack of love" (p. 6). But

those acquainted with this area of research will know that there are other kinds of experiments on monkeys many of which have strong bearings on the issue of why children need to be loved.²

Returning to Cowden's central objection to (2), Cowden misses the obvious point that love, especially the emotional aspect of love, has not been something that can be measured directly.³ Given this, scientists working in this area have had to use indirect measures. In other words, the following criteria, which have been used in various empirical studies, are indirect ways of measuring love:

1. Whether a parental figure is present or absent;
2. Turnover rate of the number of carers a child has over a period of time;
3. Duration of time a parent spends with a child;
4. Whether a child is securely attached to his primary caregiver;
5. Parental attitudes towards a child;
6. Whether a child has received adequate parental touch.

Cowden is certainly welcome to propose better empirical measures of love. However, unless she wishes to deny the validity of any scientific study that uses indirect measures, or to deny that there is such a thing as love at all, Cowden should accept that these measures can give us insights regarding the effects of lack of love on a child's development.

Additional evidence for why children need to be loved

In light of Cowden's challenge to (2), it is worthwhile to provide additional evidence for (2).

A. The positive effects of love on a child

Drawing on Bowlby's and Ainsworth's work on attachment theory, researchers have assumed that secure attachment is a good proxy for love and have investigated the longitudinal effects of secure attachment on a child.⁴ Note that Cowden (p. 8) says that researchers in this area do not take attachment to be synonymous with love. However, what is relevant is not whether a child is attached but whether a child is *securely* attached (Ainsworth 1989). The general finding is that children who were securely attached in infancy are later more sociable; more positive in their behavior toward others; less clinging and dependent on teachers; less aggressive and disruptive; more empathetic; more emotionally mature in their approach to school and other non-home settings, and show greater persistence on problem solving (Carlson and Sroufe 1995; Elicker *et al.* 1992; Frankel and Bates 1990). Indeed, in a number of studies on teenagers' sense of well-being, Raja *et al.* (1992) found that this is strongly correlated with the quality of their attachments to their parents (more so than with their peers).⁵

Other researchers take warmth and responsiveness to be a good indicator of love and have investigated the long-term effects of warm and responsive parenting on a child (Maccoby 1980).⁶ One finding is that children whose parents were warm and responsive perform better in cognitive tests (Belsky *et al.* 1980; Tamis-LeMonda and Bornstein 1989). Another finding is that children who were treated in a warm and responsive manner by their parents tend to be more altruistic, prosocial, and are more advanced in their moral understanding (Radke-Yarrow and Zahn-Waxler 1984). Finally, several studies show that among children and teenagers growing up in poor, tough neighborhoods, the lives of those who do not become delinquent are distinguished

by a single ingredient: they have experienced high levels of parental love (Glueck and Glueck 1972); Werner and Smith 1992).

B. Theoretical explanations of why children need to be loved

Psychologists, especially psychoanalytic theorists, have long theorized about the importance of early relationships for children's later development. Drawing on their theories, I shall present four explanations of why children need to be loved.

Love provides trust in others

One explanation is that children need this love in order to develop certain trust in others, especially those who care for them, and they need this trust in order to have a healthy development. This idea finds support in, e.g., Erikson (1950)'s developmental theories. Erikson hypothesizes that a human being goes through various psychosocial stages such as 'basic trust versus mistrust' (birth to one), 'autonomy versus shame and doubt' (one to three), 'initiative versus guilt' (three to six), and so on. According to Erikson, basic trust is important because it helps a child to feel secure about his environment. Without this security, a child will be reluctant to explore his surroundings. How does a child acquire such trust? Erikson argues that children who emerge from the first year with a firm sense of trust have parents who are loving and who respond predictably and reliably to the child. In contrast, infants whose early care has been erratic or harsh tend to develop mistrust. Moreover, according to Erickson, a child who has developed a sense of trust will carry this sense with him into future relationships. A young adult who developed a sense of mistrust in the first years of life may have a more difficult time

establishing secure intimate relationships with a partner or friends (Hazan and Shaver 1990; Simpson 1990; Senchak and Leonard 1992). That love provides a child with trust in others provides one explanation why children who are loved tend to do better in all aspects of development.

Love provides trust in oneself

A second explanation is that being loved is necessary for a child to develop a positive conception of himself, and having such a positive conception is necessary for healthy development.

Self-conception is a person's belief about how likely it is that he will succeed or fail, especially in the important activities that he may pursue. A person has a positive conception of himself if he believes that on balance he is more likely to succeed than fail in these activities; and a negative conception of himself if he believes that on balance he is more likely to fail than succeed in these activities (Miller and Siegel 1972, p. 14).

A child needs to have a positive conception of himself in order to develop adequately because without believing that he will generally succeed in his intended actions, the child will be fearful of attempting new things. But without attempting to try new things, a child cannot develop the capacities he needs to be an adequately functioning individual.

It is widely accepted that to have a positive conception of the self, a child needs to be loved. For example, Pringle (1986) writes,

The greatest impact of [parental] love is on the self. Approval and acceptance by others are essential for the development of self-approval and self-acceptance. Whether a child

will develop a constructive or destructive attitude, first to himself and then to other people, depends in the first place on his parents' attitude to him (p. 35).

That love provides trust in oneself also explains why those who are loved tend to be more competent in all aspects than those who are not loved.

Love provides knowledge of how to love

A third explanation is that children learn how to love by being loved, and knowing how to love is necessary for them to be adequately function individuals.

Knowing how to love is necessary for children to be adequately functioning individuals because an important aspect of life is having deep personal relationships; and to be successful in this endeavor, one must know how to love. To know how to love, a child needs to be loved because love is a complex phenomenon, which one can only learn by having received it and by having the opportunity to practice it on someone. As Miller and Siegel (1972) say, "We are not born loving any particular person or object. Nor do we develop love for something in a vacuum of experience. To truly love anything we must have extensive interaction with it. We must learn how to love and what to love" (p. 4).

Love provides a child with a motivation to develop

A fourth explanation is that to develop adequately, children need to accept and obey certain commands, and for children to be motivated to accept these commands, they need to be loved.

Children initially lack knowledge of the workings of the world. Their accepting and obeying commands from those who love them is likely therefore to keep them safe as they explore and learn about the world. There are several reasons why children need to be loved in order to be motivated to accept such commands or discipline. One is that children whose parents are loving find the interruption in parental affection that results from their having digressed from parental commands to be especially unpleasant (Parke and Walters 1967). In contrast, children who are frequently punished by non-loving parents soon learn to avoid such parents rather than be motivated to obey their commands (Redd et al. 1975). Another reason is that loving parents tend to make demands that are reasonable in terms of their child's developing capacities. Because the demands are not beyond their capacities, children are more likely to be motivated to obey them. A third reason is that loving parents tend to explain why a child is being punished. This motivates a child to accept their commands because children feel that they have been treated in a fair manner when reasonable explanations have been given (Harter 1983; Baumrind 1967). That love provides children with a motivation to accept and obey parental commands may be another explanation why children who are loved develop better, since they have someone who can effectively get them to behave and learn in a safe manner.

Taken together, these studies on the positive effect of love on a child and the theoretical explanations for why children need to be loved further reinforce the idea that (2) is true.

Response to some of Cowden's other claims

In RTBL, I examined the objection that there cannot be a duty to love because love is an emotion and is not commandable, and I pointed out that this objection requires the claim that emotions

are never commandable. I then argued that this claim is too strong; even if love were an emotion, sometimes one can use internal control, external control and cultivation to bring about emotions such as love with success when one tries to do so.⁷

Cowden is not persuaded. I shall address two of her reasons. First, Cowden (2012) says that “It may well be that parents have a moral obligation to try and love a child, many of us may be happy to concede this, however this is a distinct from a duty to actually love the child” (pp. 11-12). I already discussed this point in RTBL (Liao 2006b, pp. 427-428). Even if there were just a duty to try to love, this would not undermine the idea of children’s right to be loved, because one can just regard this right as a reason why there is a duty to try to love a child. Also, a parent who tries, but fails, to love may not be blameworthy for that failure. But it would seem appropriate for him to offer an excuse for his failure, e.g., by citing psychological or social barriers – an excuse that implicitly acknowledges the duty.

Second, Cowden (2012) says that “The conditions that Liao sets out refer to cultivating the feeling of love in a particular moment in order to act in a loving and caring way towards the child. They do not seem to be concerned with building a loving relationship or the overarching feeling of love” (p. 12). Cowden is distinguishing between love as an emotion and love as a relationship and arguing that internal and external control and cultivation do not necessarily help one develop a loving relationship. Unfortunately, Cowden misses the dialectic here. I am arguing that the claim that the emotional aspect of parental love is never commandable is too strong. I do not need to deny that the commandability of a loving relationship is much more complex.

In RTBL, I also considered the possibility of someone's pretending to love a child, and I asked whether this pretense would fulfill the duty to love a child. There are several issues here that are worth distinguishing. One is whether it is possible for anyone to pretend to love a child to such an extent that a child never finds out about this pretense. I argued that this is highly unlikely. Another issue is supposing that someone could pretend to love a child to this extent, would a child be able to develop adequately from such a pretense? This is an empirical question, and I suggested that the answer is likely to be no. The reason is that an aspect of developing adequately is developing the capacity to differentiate between genuine and fake love, since people who pretend to love us may be less likely to promote our well-being for our sake than people who genuinely love us. If someone could fool a child into believing that he loved the child when in fact he did not and the child never found out about this pretense, it seems that the child would have not acquired the capacity to differentiate between genuine and fake love.

Finally, there is the normative issue of whether providing someone with pretended love would fulfill the duty to love, if the person never finds out that the love was fake. I argued that this would not fulfill the duty to love just as giving someone fake money, when you owed the person money, and even if he (or anyone else) never found out that the money was fake, would not fulfill the duty you owe to him. On this point, Cowden argues that this is not so. She thinks that you may have "breached a duty to others, for example to the government not to forge its currency" (p. 13), but you would have fulfilled your duty. I think Cowden is simply wrong here. You might have breached your duty to the government too, but it seems that you would have also breached your duty to the person whom you owe money. Even if the person were able to purchase something with your money, you would have still wronged him.⁸

Towards the end of her paper, Cowden says that I did not consider the enforceability of the right to be loved, and then points out that enforcing this right would seriously infringe an individual's liberty and privacy: teachers and friends may be required to report the parents of children who were not loved, prospective parents may be required "to sit some sort of 'love test'," and so on (pp. 17-18).⁹ However, this was not an oversight on my part. I did not consider those kinds of enforcement precisely because they are invasive and can infringe individual liberty and privacy. For this reason, in RTBL, I considered other ways of promoting this right, which do not require these kinds of enforcement. Cowden seems to think that if something is a genuine right, it must be enforceable. But this would be a mistake. The right to respect is, for example, a genuine right, but it is not, as far as I can tell, enforceable. Also, many moral rights are not enforceable, e.g. rights between friends. In RTBL, my main interest was in showing that children have a moral (human) right to be loved.

Despite all that Cowden has said, in her conclusion, Cowden basically concedes that children need to be loved and that there can be something like a duty to love. She writes,

I am not seeking to argue that children should not be loved. Children should ideally be loved by their care-givers who genuinely care for the child's interests and combine this with loving treatment and respect for the rights of the child. Parental love is a particular and unique experience; it is something that is often cherished by those who grew up with it and by parents who feel it towards their children. It is almost always a desirable state of affairs (p. 18).

What evidence does Cowden have for her claim that parental love is 'almost always a desirable state of affairs'? Why should children be loved 'by their care-givers who *genuinely* care for the child's interests and [who] combine this with *loving* treatment' (my italics)? As far as I can see, the best explanation of these remarks is that children need to be loved. Moreover, in saying that

‘children *should* ideally be loved,’ Cowden is in effect accepting that love can be an appropriate object of a normative requirement such as a duty.

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Notes

1. For example, in Tizard’s and Hodges’s studies, the children had a generous provision of books and toys, thereby controlling for sensory stimulation (Hodges and Tizard 1989). However, because close personal relationships between adults and children were discouraged, and because the staff turnover was high (in this study, an average of 24 different nurses had worked with the children for at least a week in their first two years of life, and by the time the children were four and a half, the figure had increased to 50), Tizard and Hodges found that throughout childhood and adolescence these children were significantly more likely to display emotional and social problems, including an excessive desire for adult attention, ‘over-friendliness’ to unfamiliar adults and peers, and difficulties in establishing friendships.
2. These experiments include ‘partial isolation,’ where the infant monkeys could see, hear, smell, but not touch other monkeys (Cross and Harlow 1965); ‘surrogate rearing,’ where infant monkeys were partially isolated, but had a cloth-covered inanimate surrogate mother (Harlow 1958); ‘peer rearing,’ where infant monkeys were reared with like-aged peers but did not have contact or experience with an adult mother (Harlow 1969); and ‘variable foraging demand,’ where infant monkeys were raised by parents who were required to forage for food in low, high or variable demanding situations (Andrews and Rosenblum 1991). These experiments are intended to assess different aspects of the parent-child relationship. For instance, the ‘variable foraging demand’ studies aim to manipulate the quality of the maternal behavior. These studies found that infant monkeys raised in variable foraging demand (VFD) condition left their mothers less frequently to explore the room than infants raised in low foraging demand (LFD) or high foraging demand (HFD) conditions (Andrews and Rosenblum 1991). In a follow up study 2.5 years later when the monkeys were in their adolescence, it was found that the VFD monkeys consistently exhibited a diminished capacity for affiliative social engagement when compared to LFD monkeys (e.g., they were

less likely to initiate contact with unfamiliar monkeys and quicker to initiate aggression) and were consistently socially subordinate to the LFD monkeys when the two groups were placed together (Andrews and Rosenblum 1994). Such findings have bearings on the issue of whether children need to be loved, as they suggest that predictability in maternal responsiveness can have significant behavioral and physiological consequences for the development of infant monkeys.

3. Advances in brain imaging techniques may enable scientists to study love directly (Insel and Young 2001; Zeki 2007).
4. For example, Kochanska (1997) says that “Attachment scholars believe that children raised in a loving, responsive manner become eager to cooperate with their caregivers and to embrace their values” (p. 192).
5. See also (Greenberg *et al.* 1983)
6. Some writers argue that secure attachment is an incidence of responsiveness (Kochanska 1997).
7. See also (Liao 2006a; Liao 2011).
8. Consider a different example, suppose that you borrowed a van Gogh from a wealthy friend. Suppose further that you know that your friend does not care very much for this piece of artwork; and that if you were to give her a fake van Gogh she would not notice and would just put it in a storage room and never look at it again. Pace Cowden, it seems that you would not have fulfilled your duty to her even if she never found out that you gave her a fake van Gogh.
9. Cowden also attributes to me the view that love “will not be coupled with negative treatment” (p. 13), and then argues at length that love can produce undesirable treatment, e.g., children are routinely beaten by parents who love them. Cowden is attacking a straw person, since my claim is that children need to be loved in order to develop adequately, and it is not necessary for me to claim that their being loved could not result in negative treatments to them. Compare: someone who holds that children need water in order to develop adequately need not deny that too much water could harm them.

Note on Contributor

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