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## Family Focus

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generally unappreciated. She thought that anyone could perform her tasks and child-caretaking, and that there was nothing special about her. Natalie put her children and husband first. Because she was also an exceptionally giving person to her extended family and friends as well, Natalie sometimes felt that no one was looking out for her. People in her life expected her to be responsible and loving, and Natalie felt taken for granted.

We all hear and read about self-care being important. Natalie was already doing positive things for herself such as monthly massages and regular exercise and yoga classes. She was in good shape physically but needed an emotional tune-up.

If you are in a similar position of needing more affirmation from others, it's important to take action for yourself. Try not to let pride or embarrassment stand in your way. Let those close to you know how you're feeling. Some will offer validation right away, whereas others may need a cue that you could use a boost. Ask what they see you doing well and how they view you as a parent, a partner, a friend and as a person. You can ask older children to tell you what they like about you (and to skip the critiques for now). You can ask younger children to draw a picture of you and tell you about it. Chances are it will be a loving effort.

Parents are urged to listen carefully and offer positive, encouraging comments to their children. Yet, what too often goes unaddressed is that parents would love to receive this as well. A systematic approach ensures that everyone in the family can have this need met - being heard and receiving caring and encouragement.

If you establish a family meeting time for sharing concerns and problem-solving, you can incorporate validation for everyone each time. Take turns having everyone share specific things that they appreciate about each member of the family. In addition, you may want to have a time when everyone can share something they are proud of about themselves and then receive some affirmation. If you don't want to have regular family meetings, you can do this exercise on an impromptu basis. The important thing is to do it regularly. Your children will become used to noticing positive behavior among family members and learn how to share their observations. Not only will they offer others some compliments, but they will also get reinforcement for their own positive words and actions.

It is more meaningful if you can give an example of something you have seen or heard, rather than just offering a generalization. If you want to tell Kevin he was being considerate, let him know that you saw him share a toy with his little sister or let a friend go first in a game. Be careful not to use labels, such as honest, smart, talented, etc. Labeling one child a certain way can cause another child to feel less adequate.

It's natural for parents to doubt themselves at times, especially if their child experiences a behavioral, social or academic challenge. When a child is struggling, conscientious parents tend to first look at themselves and what they did or didn't do that contributed to the problem. If 10-year-old Skylar wasn't included in a classmate's sleepover party, not only might her parents feel bad for her, but they may blame themselves for not getting to know the classmate's parents or for not inviting the child to their house, or for not helping Skylar learn to navigate her social environment better.

In addition, there's what I call the "compare and despair" syndrome that all too often results in parents feeling unhappy with their own situation while seeing supposed evidence of other people or families being much more successful. A previous Family Focus column explored how comparing yourself to others can lead to negative feelings about yourself and your life. It's important to realize that we can't always see behind the scenes of others' lives to be able to evaluate accurately. If you find yourself automatically making comparisons, try to become aware that you're doing this and tell yourself it's counter-productive. It may take a while to first catch yourself doing it and then to block it. A tool in this process is to think of all that you have to be grateful for instead of feeling diminished by making comparisons.

Natalie, the mother of three young children, expressed how she felt her life was very routine and that she felt

If one child is labeled as smart and another is labeled as kind, each may think he or she lacks or doesn't have enough of the quality the other has. Use action words, not nouns or adjectives. For example, you saw that Olivia studied hard and did well on her math exam. Or you appreciated that Sam was being thoughtful by unloading the dishwasher.

The hope is that you will be able to receive recognition and appreciation from those whose opinions are most meaningful to you. Many of us receive validation from our jobs, but it's important to look for ways to fill up our personal and emotional tanks. We can ask others to help with this from time to time. And we can set up a systematic approach within our family.

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[back](#)

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