

CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM



Self-esteem can be defined as how people feel about themselves. Children's levels of self-esteem are evident in their behavior and attitudes. If children feel good about themselves, these good feelings will be reflected in how they relate to friends, teachers, siblings, parents, and others. Self-esteem is something that affects individuals throughout life, therefore, it is very important for parents to help their children develop healthy levels of self-esteem. There are many things parents can do to help their children learn that they are lovable, capable, and competent, beginning when their children are at a very young age. Unfortunately, it is also at a very young age that children can begin to develop low self-esteem. Parents must be very careful not to plant the seeds of low self-esteem in their children unknowingly. Children learn their first lessons about self-esteem from their parents.

Some Facts About Self-Esteem

- *Children begin forming beliefs about themselves early in life.
- *Children look to parents and other important adults for evidence that they're lovable, smart, capable, etc. If they don't get this evidence, low self-esteem develops.
- *Self-esteem affects school success. Children who feel good about themselves and their abilities are much more likely to do well in school than children who often think they can't do things right. School success, in turn, affects a child's self-esteem. How children do in school will affect how they feel about themselves. Children who do poorly in school often think poorly of themselves.

*Self-esteem affects how children relate to other people. Children who feel good about themselves tend to have positive relationships with other people. On the other hand, children who don't like themselves often have trouble relating to other people.

*Self-esteem affects creativity. Children with low self-esteem are less likely to take the risks involved in being creative than children with healthy self-esteem.

*Parents affect their children's self-esteem. A parent's self-esteem is reflected in his or her parenting style. Research shows that children with high self-esteem tend to have parents who show their children lots of love and acceptance. Children with low self-esteem tend to have parents who are judgmental and critical.

*Children with low self-esteem tend to have more battles with their parents than do children with healthy self-esteem.

What Parents Can Do

Here are some things that parents can do to help their children develop healthy levels of self-esteem.

***Praise your children.** Children thrive on praise. There is no such thing as too much! Praise must be specific and sincere to have a positive effect. It's not necessary for parents to wait until their children do something exceptional to provide praise. Praising an everyday event like getting ready for school on time is enough. What's important is that parents focus on the positive things their children do instead of on the negatives. Parents who are frequently critical and disapproving tend to have children with low self-esteem.

***Show your children lots of love and affection.** Children need to be shown love and affection through both words and physical actions. Parents should tell their children often that they love them and think they're special. Parents can show their children that they are loved by giving lots of hugs, pats on the back, kisses, etc.

***Treat your children with respect.** Parents should treat their children with the same amount of respect that they would show to a friend or a stranger on the street, for that matter. One important way parents can show respect to their children is to watch what they say to them. Some parents speak to their children in ways they wouldn't dream of speaking to

someone else. Some parents call their children names and/or belittle them when they are angry. Such methods can have a negative effect on children's self-esteem. Parents can show their children respect beginning with saying "please" and "thank-you." Parents should also require that their children do the same when necessary.

***Be consistent.** Children need for things to be predictable in their lives. They need to know what their parents expect from them. They also need to know what to expect from their parents. Family rules should be made clear to children, and they should be consistently enforced. This is one way for children to learn which behaviors are acceptable, and which are not.

***Don't demand perfection from your children.** Nobody's perfect, and parents shouldn't expect their children to be. Children need to know that their parents accept them for the individuals they are, flaws and all. Such acceptance helps children feel secure in themselves, which in turn enhances self-esteem. Some parents may think that they must put pressure on their children for their children to do well. In fact, the opposite is true. Children whose parents accept them as they are are more likely to feel secure enough in themselves to take the risks necessary to succeed. Children whose parents pressure them to do well may end up resenting their parents and rebelling against them. Instead of criticizing children when they make mistakes, parents should try to turn these mistakes into learning experiences, and instead of pressuring children to excel, parents should ease up on the pressure and offer praise and encouragement.

***Pay attention to your own behavior and attitudes.** How parents feel about themselves and the world around them is reflected in their behavior. Children model their own behavior and attitudes after their parents'. Parents can't expect their children to develop a healthy attitude about themselves unless they first see this healthy attitude in their parents. If parents don't feel good about themselves, there is no way they will be able to show their children how to feel good about themselves.

***Listen to and respond to your children.** In their conversations with their children, parents should make sure their children have their complete attention. Parents can do this by setting aside anything they might have been doing, making eye contact, and making physical contact through a pat or a hug. Parents should let their children know that their comments and questions are important by treating them with respect. If

parents don't pay attention to what their children say, or if they act as if what their children have to say is silly or boring, their children are likely to believe that they are not important. Parents should also encourage their children to ask questions and should answer their children's questions honestly and thoroughly. Parents who encourage their children to ask questions are letting their children know that they want them to learn and are willing to help them do so. Parents should try to answer their children's questions as honestly and completely as possible. They should also admit when they don't know something instead of avoiding the question or making up an answer. Children don't expect their parents to know everything, but they do expect them to be open and honest.

***Keep the promises you make to your children.** When parents tell their children they are going to do something, they should make every effort to follow through. Kept promises tell children that their parents are honest and true to their word and that they love them enough to follow through. Unkept promises, on the other hand, confuse children, and these children may be led to believe that their parents don't care enough about them to follow through with what they promise. This can be very damaging to a child's self esteem. As a rule, it is probably best for parents not to make promises to their children that they won't absolutely be able to keep.

***Don't let your children criticize themselves.** Criticizing actions, such as performance on a test is okay. However, calling oneself dumb because of a bad grade is not. Parents must be careful not to ignore it when their children criticize themselves. When parents catch their children being self-critical they should correct them. Parents can do this by pointing out that it's not that the child is inadequate, but rather the problem is a result of some action the child has or has not taken. If parents don't intervene when their children are being self-critical, children may believe that their parents agree with them.

***Spend time with your children.** Parents should set aside "special time" each day to spend with their children. Parents should give each individual child their own separate, undivided attention. This time can be spent together doing some activity of the child's choosing. Parents should be careful not to spend this time teaching their children. This time should be fun and stress-free for both parents and their children. The amount of time spent per day is not what's most important. Special times as short as 15 minutes per day will still send children the message that their parents value spending time with them and that they are important.

***Teach your children to use positive self-talk.** Positive self-talk is saying positive things about one's self to one's self. Positive self-talk is a very powerful tool for children to have. The more children repeat good things about themselves to themselves the more likely they will be to actually believe them and incorporate the positive feelings that go along with them. Positive self-statements can be specific, for example, "I got an A on my math test. I am really good at long division," or they can be general, for example, "I am a good person and a good friend." The best way for parents to teach their children to use positive self-talk is to use it themselves. Positive self-talk will not only benefit children, but parents, too.

***Encourage your children to make some decisions for themselves.** Decision-making is an important skill for children to have. Such a skill will become more and more important as children grow and approach adulthood. Parents can encourage decision-making in their children in many different ways. First of all, starting at an early age, parents can give their children options and ask them to choose one. For example, parents could ask their children to decide what the family has for dinner on a given night, giving them a list of two or three menus to choose from. Or, they could ask their children to choose one of three outfits to wear to school. As children get older, they will be able to handle more choices. Playing games that require decision making, like checkers, are good skill builders, too. When children make decisions, it's important that parents require their children to stick to the decisions they make. Children need to learn that every decision they make will have its own consequence.

***Give your children some responsibility.** Children thrive when they are given responsibilities. Responsibilities such as weekly or daily chores tell children that their parents think they are capable and that they trust them to get the job done. Parents should make an effort to praise their children when they follow through with their responsibilities.

***Give your children the freedom to take risks.** No parent wants to see their children fail, and some parents try to protect their children from failure by steering them away from activities and situations that carry the risk of failure. However, it is important for children to learn that everybody fails, grown-ups and children alike, at some time or another. Children cannot learn how to most effectively handle disappointments and frustrations unless they experience them. Therefore, instead of being overprotective and trying to prevent failure, parents should help their

children cope with it in positive ways when it happens. Parents who teach their children how to cope with failure and/or rejection when it occurs are giving their children a tool that will be useful throughout life. When failure or rejection occurs, parents should make sure that their children learn not to take it personally. Parents can point out to their children that such things happen for many reasons, but not because they are not good people. If children learn to see rejection and/or failure as something that is temporary and that it is not a reflection of the individuals they are, they are more likely not to let failure or rejection affect their self-esteem.

***Encourage your children's friendships.** Children's social needs are very important to the development of healthy self-esteem. Children need to spend time with friends to learn how to relate to people outside of the family and to people their own age. Such friendships teach children how to cooperate with and to connect with other people.

***Encourage your children's interests and abilities.** Parents should encourage their children to get involved in activities they're interested in. It can be any type of activity, provided children enjoy it and can succeed at it. Taking part in an activity that is interesting and fun, and that they are good at is an excellent self-esteem booster for children. Encouragement from parents lets children know that their parents think they're capable and competent.

***Display your children's artwork, schoolwork and projects.** This is one of the best ways for parents to show their children that they value the work they do, and thus value them. Children's work can either be posted in one area of the home, for example many parents use the refrigerator door for such displays, or it can be posted in different places throughout the house. What's important is that the work be posted in a prominent place where others will be able to see it. Parents who display their children's work are sending their children important messages: That their work is important, wanted, and appreciated. If and when the time comes to discard some of the work to make room for new items, parents should be careful not to let their children see them throwing the work away. This may send the wrong message to children. Instead, parents should discard the work discreetly or perhaps save the work in a file or a scrapbook. Parents should keep in mind, too, that it is not a good idea for them to display work that their children aren't happy with. This could cause undue embarrassment.

Remember...

There are many things parents can do to help their children develop healthy self-esteem. Parents should keep in mind that self-esteem is something that begins to develop while children are very young, so parents' efforts must begin early. Parents should keep in mind, too, that all children, at one time or another, will show one or more of the symptoms of low self-esteem. Parents should watch out for **patterns** of behavior that don't seem to disappear with time. If efforts to increase children's self-esteem don't have any effect, parents should consult their children's health care provider or a mental health professional.

Fifty Things Parents Can Say to Their Children to Praise and Encourage Them

1. You're on the right track now!
2. You're doing a great job!
3. Now you've figured it out!
4. That's RIGHT!
5. Now you have the hang of it!
6. That's the way!
7. Now you have it!
8. Nice going.
9. You did it that time!
10. GREAT!
11. FANTASTIC!
12. TREMENDOUS!
13. TERRIFIC!
14. How did you do that?
15. That's better.
16. EXCELLENT!
17. That's the best thing you've
ever done!
18. Good going!
19. That's really nice.
20. WOW!
21. Keep up the good work.
22. Much better!
23. Good for you!
24. SUPER!
25. You do such a good job of _____.
26. You make it look easy.
27. Way to go!
28. You're getting better every day.
29. WONDERFUL!
30. I knew you could do it!
31. You're doing beautifully.
32. That's the way to do it!
33. Keep on trying.
- 34.. You're the best!
35. You're doing much better today.
36. Keep working on it, you're
getting
better.
37. You're very good at that.
38. I'm very proud of you.
39. I like the way you listen.
40. You've just about got it.
41. You can do it.
42. PERFECT!
43. That's IT!
44. You're really improving.
45. Good work!
46. OUTSTANDING!
47. SENSATIONAL!
48. That's the best ever.
49. You must have been practicing.
50. You should be very proud of
yourself.

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