



Self-Esteem in Children

When we hear words like:

“Great job! You have worked hard”

... we may want to work even harder.

When we hear words like:

“Shut up! What do you think you’re doing?” ... *we may not venture a try the next time.*

When we are given a caring touch on the shoulder or a hug that says someone cares

... we may feel good about who we are and think good thoughts.

When we are yanked by the shirt or arm and told to sit down and shut up

... we may feel we have done something wrong by simply being.

Self-esteem is the degree to which children feel accepted and valued by adults and peers who are important to them. The development of a sense of self is very complex. It is developed from within a person and shaped as well by the people around them (Katz, 1995). Being able to manage one’s own life, feelings, and decisions comes from the foundation of a strong sense of self. Being able to manage helps people cope when difficulties arise.

The development of self comes in phases and is shaped by experiences. **Developing a sense of trust** in the people who care for them is the first important stage of developing a sense of self in children. Children must learn to trust others so they in turn can learn to trust themselves. Adults who give warm, loving touches, cuddle their children, and answer their calls for what they need are providing the essential first ingredients to a healthy sense of self in their child—making

the young one feel wanted, valued, and loved.

When children begin to toddle and walk, they need to have a **safe, supportive environment to explore**. It is a child’s job to explore and learn about things. Without this natural desire to touch, taste, and feel things around them, they could not learn or get ready for school. Children need a place where they do not have to hear over and over words like, “Stop, get down, or NO.” Childproof the environment, paying attention to safety while giving children bright, interesting playthings. These do not have to be costly. Even a cardboard box or plastic spoons and bowls will be interesting to children.

If children do not feel they can explore independently, they will feel ashamed and doubt their abilities. By about 18 months of age, children begin to be independent. Parents who expect this need for independence and **do not begin a power struggle** will be rewarded later with a child who is interested in and excited about learning on his or her own. These children will learn to depend on themselves and not on adults for every answer.

Young children begin to see themselves as separate from their parents as they acquire language. They begin to name themselves as “self” or “me” and use the word “mine,” often to an extreme. They are VERY self-centered and even think the world revolves around them until about age 7. They have difficulty thinking about another person’s point of view, and they even think others are thinking what they are thinking. Their brains

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are developing very rapidly, but they are still incomplete, and children simply cannot think like adults yet! They are impulsive, self-centered, and do not think through, nor plan, their actions. This is the critical stage for parents to be patient and work hard to set a positive example for what they want mirrored in their child. The groundwork that has been laid as a young child follows older children into adulthood.

Self-control, another part of the development of self, is first seen in bladder and bowel control. But it is not until about age 6 or 7 that children are better able to control behaviors like whining or fussing. With guidance, however, control eventually will come. In the meantime, talk to children about expectations for their behavior. Being a good role model works best. Telling them only once will not work, however. Telling and showing them many, many times will be required as they mature.

Parents and teachers of teens may want to persuade teens to give up the ever-common arguing for the sake of arguing. But arguing gives teens a chance to learn to express themselves appropriately while trying out their own theories. The identity phase strongly influences behavior during this time and is influenced by adults who are respected by youth who can accept or reject the teen's personhood. Peer acceptance plays a large part in building a positive sense of self as well.

What helps children mature with a positive sense of self?

Age—With age, a child will learn increased control, gain memory, develop cognitively, and learn language and a sense of how to plan for the future.

Supported waiting—Children have difficulty waiting, but can be supported while they wait. Talk to them. For example: "In 5 more minutes, dinner will be ready. I know you can wait that long."

Follow through—Follow through after a child waits. Do not imply a reward will come if it will not. This is part of trust!

Modeling—Adults who control their own anger, aggression, language, and needs provide positive models for their children.

Feeling in control—Provide children with age-appropriate choices. Offer two choices you can live with, and give the child an opportunity to learn to make decisions by choosing.

Many Dimensions of Self-Esteem

Feelings of self-worth are many-faceted. It is not just ONE big area. Adults and children alike may feel good about one aspect of themselves and not good about another. For example, children have feelings about how well they do in school, about how they make and keep friends, about their

athletic abilities, their physical appearance, and their conduct or behavior. All of these aspects make up the total sense of self worth.

Susan Harter, a psychologist from Colorado, measures how children 8 years of age and older feel about themselves with questions such as these. Children are asked which half of the statement is most like them.

Some kids feel very good about their schoolwork.

BUT

Other kids worry about whether they can do the schoolwork assigned to them.

Some kids are happy with the way they look.

BUT

Other kids are not happy with the way they look.

Children as young as age 4 are generally assessed with pictures to determine their sense of esteem or worth.

Counterpoint

Many people believe that low self-esteem lies at the root of many of society's problems (Katz, 1995). However, other studies on children's school achievement argue that telling children how wonderful they are over and over can be counterproductive and actually make children perform worse. A study by Baumeister, Boden, and Smart (1996) found that achievement comes first and self-esteem follows.

This and other studies (Harter, 1983) lend caution against *empty*, self-building words to inflate a child's ego (Shokraii, 2000). Remember the delicate balance. It is important to have meaningful communication with children, but be sure they learn to motivate themselves toward high performance without remarks from others.

Parents and caregivers can support children as they grow. Helping children learn to feel secure about themselves and helping them learn how to make decisions about everyday events will serve as solid footing for lifelong learning. Doing well in school, being able to manage feelings, and making friends and keeping them are all areas that must be learned. Children who are able to cope in these ways will feel positive about their abilities, and this will serve them well into adulthood.



Strategies for Nurturing a Positive Sense of Self

For Preschoolers

- Build on a child's interest by helping him or her experience or learn more about a topic.
- Involve children in real chores and helping tasks to give them a sense of accomplishment.
- Treat children with respect. Ask their opinion and listen. Give meaningful feedback.
- Learn about typical stage development, including the development of trust, independence, and initiative.
- During times of disappointment, let your child know you still love and support him or her. After the crisis has passed, reflect on and discuss possible ways to cope in the future.
- Model skills you want your child to learn, like being kind, picking up after yourself, brushing your teeth, voice control, or reading.
- Listen to children, and pay attention to your responding tone of voice.
- Realize what your hot buttons are, and try to learn to cope with them.
- Spend time together. Often time spent together is better than "band-aiding" behaviors during stressful times.
- Teach problem-solving skills, and allow children to make decisions under your steady guidance.
- Reinforce the positive. Say, "I sure did enjoy the trip to the store today with you! You were fun to be with."
- Prepare children for social settings. Before going to a friend's house, talk about what will be expected. But, as an adult, remember their age has a bearing on their actions.

For School-Age Children

- Respect a child's strengths, and they will respect you.
- Help the child set goals, and then link ongoing effort with success.
- Examine values. Self-esteem is grounded in what a person values.
- Stick to the subject. Say, "The dishes are still in the sink," NOT "You are so lazy—why haven't you washed the dishes?"
- Know what your child is learning in school. Show an interest in and talk about school subjects.
- Identify and talk to children about feelings. Show you care even if you can't do anything about the problem. For example, say, "I'm sorry you are feeling sad..." Or "You seem so happy today. What happened?"
- Model healthy ways to express anger. Talk about ways to release anger.
- Model acceptable behaviors, such as kindness, safety, manners, cooperation, sharing, and empathy.
- Teach self-talk. Adults learn to weigh options mentally. Teach a child how to decide by talking out options.
- Value your child's opinion and respect him or her. They often make great points!
- Help children develop an internal sense of self-control. Unfortunately, adults will not always be around to be their conscience and guide. Internal control comes from experience in making decisions. Adults who direct children's behavior with physical reprimands are not helping them learn from the *inside out*.

For Teens

- Keep talking to teens even if it seems they don't listen or care.
- Talk to teens about making good choices and about the many ways we express how we feel about others.
- Say two good things before talking about any bad things.
- Tell the teen something about yourself so they will feel safe sharing, too.
- Respect a teen's need for privacy but continue to monitor what they do and whom they are with.
- Help teens start planning for their future. Talk about options.
- Use humor. Enjoy it when they are humorous or fun.
- Build on interests by finding outlets for their talents.



Quickie Self-Esteem Builders

- Help your child plan and shop for a meal.
- Help your child identify a hobby.
- Talk about traditions.
- Get to know his/her friends.
- Visit libraries, museums, and parks together.
- Walk together.
- Spend quiet time together.
- Be available.
- Help your child learn good body habits, such as washing hands and brushing teeth.
- Answer questions.
- Respect your child's needs.
- Get to know your child's teacher.
- Read together.
- Work on a chore chart together.
- Play a game together.
- Draw together, and talk about the drawings.
- Accept any answers about their stories or art.
- Look at a magazine together.
- Practice pouring, measuring, and scooping.
- Dance together.
- Play an imagination game.
- Use words like: "You've got what it takes, how clever, well done, I like you, that's neat, you deserve a big hug, and you're so smart!"

Stretch and Think

Nearly 30 years ago, one teacher reflected:

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is MY response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.

—Haim Ginott from *Teacher and Child*, 1972.

Think about how this could hold true for your role as a teacher or parent.

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Summary of key concepts:

- The sense of self develops in phases.
- Being able to explore safely, children begin to test their limitations.
- Self-control is difficult for young children. Parents need great patience in the early years!
- Self-esteem has many parts, including how children feel about their schoolwork, athletic ability, their appearance, and behavior. One may be high and another low.
- Be sure that praise is genuine.
- Model the behaviors you want to build in your child.
- Name and talk about feelings.



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