

## **DEVELOPING YOUR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM**

**David Lowenstein, Ph.D.**  
**Psychologist**

Healthy self-esteem is a child's armor against the challenges of the world. Kids who feel good about themselves seem to have an easier time handling conflicts and resisting negative pressures. They tend to smile more readily and enjoy life. These kids are realistic and generally optimistic. In contrast, for children who have low self-esteem, challenges can become sources of major anxiety and frustration. Children who think poorly of themselves have a hard time finding solutions to problems. If they are plagued by self-critical thoughts, such as "I'm no good" or "I can't do anything right," they may become passive, withdrawn, or depressed. Read further to discover the important role you can play in promoting healthy self-esteem in your child.

### **What Is Self-esteem?**

In order to equip your child with the tools that will help her develop healthy self-esteem, it is essential to better understand what self-esteem is. Many professionals describe self-esteem as a "...collection of beliefs or feelings that we have about ourselves. How we define ourselves hugely influences our motivations, attitudes, and behaviors." This pattern tends to start very early in life at about the age of 3 or 4. Children are exploring many ideas and reaching conclusions about themselves that begin to crystallize during this time period. But the process starts even before then, during infancy. When a baby or toddler reaches a milestone, she experiences a sense of accomplishment that bolsters her developing self-esteem. Learning to roll over after dozens of unsuccessful attempts or finally mastering getting the spoon into her mouth every time she eats are experiences that teach a young child a "can do" attitude. The concept of success following persistence starts early. As a child tries, fails, tries again, fails again and again, and then finally succeeds, she is developing ideas about her own capabilities. At the same time, she is creating thoughts about herself based on her interactions with other people. This is why parental involvement is key to helping a child form accurate, healthy self-perceptions. Self-esteem can also be defined as the combination of feelings of capability with feelings of being loved. A child who is happy with her achievements, but does not feel loved, may eventually experience low self-esteem. Likewise, a child who feels loved but is hesitant about her own abilities can also end up feeling poorly about herself. Healthy self-esteem results when the right balance is attained.

### **Signs of Unhealthy and Healthy Self-esteem**

Self-esteem fluctuates as a child grows. It is frequently changed and fine-tuned, as it is affected by a child's experiences and new perceptions. It helps for parents to be aware of the signs of both healthy and unhealthy self-esteem. A child who has low self-esteem may not want to try new things. She frequently speaks negatively about herself, saying such things as, "I'm stupid," "I'll

never learn how to do this," or "What's the point? Nobody cares about me anyway." She exhibits a low tolerance for frustration, giving up easily or waiting for somebody else to take over. Children with low self-esteem see temporary setbacks as permanent, intolerable conditions. A sense of pessimism predominates. A child who has healthy self-esteem tends to enjoy interacting with others. She's comfortable in social settings and enjoys group activities as well as independent pursuits. She's willing to pursue new interests. When challenges arise, she is able to work toward finding solutions. She voices discontent without belittling herself or others. For example, rather than saying, "I'm an idiot," she says, "I don't understand this." She knows her strengths and weaknesses, and accepts them. A sense of optimism prevails.

### **What Parents Can Do to Help**

How can a parent help to foster healthy self-esteem in a child? Here are some tips that can make a big difference:

#### **1. Watch what you say:**

Children are very sensitive to parents' words. Remember to praise your child not only for a job well done, but also for effort.

#### **2. But be truthful:**

For example, if your child doesn't make the soccer team, avoid saying something like, "Well, next time you'll work harder and make it." Instead, say something like, "Well, you didn't make the team, but I'm really proud of the effort you put into it." Reward effort and completion instead of outcome.

#### **3. Be a positive role model:**

If you are excessively harsh on yourself, pessimistic, or unrealistic about your abilities and limitations, your child may eventually mirror you. Nurture your own self-esteem, and your child will have a great role model.

#### **4. Identify and redirect your child's inaccurate beliefs:**

The pervasive step for parents to take is to identify kids' irrational beliefs about themselves. Whether they are about perfection, attractiveness, ability, or anything else, these inaccurate perceptions can take root and become reality to a child. For example, a child who does very well in school but struggles with math may say, "I can't do math. I'm a bad student." Not only is this a false generalization, it's also a belief that will set her up for failure.

#### **5. Encourage your child to see the situation in its true light:**

A helpful response might be: "You are a good student. You do great in school. Math is just a subject that you need to spend more time on."

#### **6. Be spontaneous and affectionate with your child:**

Your love will go a long way to boost your child's self-esteem. Give her hugs. Tell her you're proud of her. Leave a note in her lunch box that reads, "I think you're terrific!" Give praise frequently and honestly, without overdoing it. Kids can tell whether something

comes from the heart. Give positive, accurate feedback. A comment such as, "You always work yourself up into such a frenzy!" will cause a child to start believing she has no control over her outbursts. A better statement is, "Boy, you were really mad at your brother. But I appreciate that you didn't yell at him or hit him." This acknowledges her feelings and rewards the choice she made, encouraging her to make the right choice again next time.

#### **7. Create a safe, nurturing home environment:**

A child who does not feel safe or is being abused in her own home will suffer immensely from low self-esteem. A child who is exposed to parents who fight and argue repeatedly may become depressed and withdrawn. Always remember to protect and respect your child. Make your home a safe haven for your family. Watch for signs of abuse by others, problems in school, trouble with peers, and other potential factors that may affect your child's self-esteem. Deal with these issues sensitively but swiftly. Help your child become involved in constructive experiences. Activities that encourage cooperation rather than competition are especially helpful in fostering self-esteem. For example, mentoring programs in which an older child helps a younger one learn to read can do wonders for both children.

#### **Finding Professional Help**

If you suspect that your child has low self-esteem, you can get professional help. Family and child counselors can work to uncover underlying issues that are preventing your child from feeling good about herself. Therapy can adjust the way a child views herself and the world around her, enabling her to first see herself in a more realistic light and then to accept who she truly is. With a little help, every child can develop healthy self-esteem for a happier, more fulfilling life.