

# CHILDREN & SELF-ESTEEM

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## **Your Child's Mental Health: Building Self-Esteem in Children**

Most parents have heard that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" and it's especially true with self-esteem in children. All children need love and appreciation and thrive on positive attention. Yet, how often do parents forget to use words of encouragement such as, "that's right," "wonderful," or "good job"? No matter the age of children or adolescents, good parent-child communication is essential for raising children with self-esteem and confidence.

Self-esteem is an indicator of good mental health. It is how we feel about ourselves. Poor self-esteem is nothing to be blamed for, ashamed of, or embarrassed about. Some self-doubt, particularly during adolescence, is normal—even healthy—but poor self-esteem should not be ignored. In some instances, it can be a symptom of a mental health disorder or emotional disturbance.

Parents can play important roles in helping their children feel better about themselves and developing greater confidence. Doing this is important because children with good self-esteem:

- Act independently
- Assume responsibility
- Take pride in their accomplishments
- Tolerate frustration
- Handle peer pressure appropriately
- Attempt new tasks and challenges
- Handle positive and negative emotions
- Offer assistance to others

Words and actions have great impact on the confidence of children, and children, including adolescents, remember the positive statements parents and caregivers say to them. Phrases such as "I like the way you..." or "You are improving at..." or "I appreciate the way you..." should be used on a daily basis. Parents also can smile, nod, wink, pat on the back, or hug a child to show attention and appreciation.

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are plagued by self-critical thoughts, such as "I'm no good" or "I can't do anything right," they may become passive, withdrawn, or depressed. Faced with a new challenge, their immediate response is "I can't." Read on to discover the important role you can play in promoting healthy self-esteem in your child.

### **What Is Self-Esteem?**

Self-esteem is the collection of beliefs or feelings that we have about ourselves, or our "self-perceptions." How we define ourselves influences our motivations, attitudes, and behaviors and affects our emotional adjustment.

Patterns of self-esteem start very early in life. For example, when a baby or toddler reaches a milestone, he or she experiences a sense of accomplishment that bolsters self-esteem. Learning to roll over after dozens of unsuccessful attempts or finally mastering getting the spoon into his or her mouth every time he or 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 then finally succeeds, he or she is developing ideas about his or her own capabilities. At the same time, he or she is creating a self-concept based on 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 an achievement but does not feel loved may eventually experience low self-esteem. Likewise, a child who feels loved but is hesitant about his or her own abilities can also end up with a low self-esteem. 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, because 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. He or she may frequently speak negatively about his or 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." The child may exhibit a low tolerance for frustration, giving up easily or waiting for somebody else to take over. Children with low self-esteem tend to be overly critical of and easily disappointed in themselves. Kids 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. He or she is comfortable in social settings and enjoys group activities as well as independent pursuits. When challenges arise, he or she is able to work toward finding solutions. He or she

voices discontent without belittling herself or others. For example, rather than saying, "I'm an idiot," a child with healthy self-esteem says, "I don't understand this." He or she knows his or 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:

- **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. 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.
- **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.
- **Identify and redirect your child's inaccurate beliefs.** It's important for parents to identify kids' irrational beliefs about themselves, whether they are about perfection, attractiveness, ability, or anything else. Helping your child set more accurate standards and be more realistic in evaluating himself or herself will help your child have a more healthy self-concept. Inaccurate perceptions of self 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 your child up for failure. 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. We'll work on it together."
- **Be spontaneous and affectionate with your child.** Your love will go a long way to boost your child's self-esteem. Give your child hugs. Tell your child you're proud of him or her. Leave a note in your child's 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 he or she has no control over his or her outbursts. A better statement is, "You were really mad at your brother. But I appreciate that you didn't yell at him or hit him." This acknowledges your child's feelings and rewards the choice that your child made, encouraging your child to make the right choice again next time.

- **Create a safe, nurturing home environment.** A child who does not feel safe or is being abused at 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 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 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 himself or herself. Therapy can adjust the way a child views himself or herself and the world. This can enable a child to first see himself or herself in a more realistic light, and then to accept who he or she truly is. With a little help, every child can develop healthy self-esteem for a happier, more fulfilling life.

What else can parents do?

- **Be generous with praise.** Parents must develop the habit of looking for situations in which children are doing good jobs, displaying talents, or demonstrating positive character traits. Remember to praise children for jobs well done and for effort.
- **Teach positive self-statements.** It is important for parents to redirect children's inaccurate or negative beliefs about themselves and to teach them how to think in positive ways.
- **Avoid criticism that takes the form of ridicule or shame.** Blame and negative judgments are at the core of poor self-esteem and can lead to emotional disorders.
- **Teach children about decision-making and to recognize when they have made good decisions.** Let them "own" their problems. If they solve them, they gain confidence in themselves. If you solve them, they'll remain dependent on you. Take the time to answer questions. Help children think of alternative options.
- **Show children that you can laugh at yourself.** Show them that life doesn't need to be serious all the time and that some teasing is all in fun. Your sense of humor is important for their well-being.

### **Self-Esteem Symptom Checklist For Parents**

- Does your child put himself down constantly?
- Does your child exert minimal effort toward tasks because he doubts he can be successful?
- Does your child act shy around others?
- Is your child overly dependent on you to take care of him?
- Does your child worry things will not work out?
- Is your child afraid to try new tasks?
- Does your child feel overwhelmed by school and life?
- Is your child optimistic about the future?
- Does your child compare himself to others and feel inadequate?
- Would your child like to be someone else?
- Does your child constantly doubt he can achieve anything?
- Does your child take things out on others?
- Does your child lose his temper easily?
- Does your child constantly argue about trivial issues?
- Does your child think he is unimportant?

If you answered "yes" to many of these questions, your child is most likely experiencing self-esteem difficulties and would benefit from interventions targeted toward increasing his sense of self and outlook on life. Find a professional who can help you and your child with these problems.