

Instilling Self-Esteem in Children

How Can Parents Help?

By Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A.

We all have a mental picture of who we are, how we look, what we excel at and what our weaknesses are. We paint this picture over time, beginning when we are very young children. The term **self-esteem** refers to this picture, which is a person's mental image of himself or herself. Most people's thoughts and feelings about themselves vary a bit based on their daily experiences. Self-esteem however, is something more fundamental than the daily ups and downs we experience in relation to our interactions in life. Self-esteem is all about how much people value themselves, and how worthy they feel. Self-esteem is important because feeling good about yourself will influence how you act. People with high self-esteem will be more in control of their behavior, and their choices; they will make friends easier and enjoy life more. Healthy self-esteem is based on our ability to know ourselves and still be able to accept and value ourselves unconditionally. People with poor or low self-esteem frequently feel as if no one likes or accepts them, and that they can't do anything well. This negative self-image leads to significant problems in all areas of life. Socially, people with low self-esteem have trouble making and keeping friends; they begin to feel isolated and alone. This isolation can result in depression, anxiety and extreme acting out. People with low self-esteem are much more vulnerable to substance abuse, promiscuity, bullying or being bullied, eating disorders, and suicide.



Poor self-esteem is nothing to be blamed for, ashamed of, or embarrassed about. Some self-doubt, particularly during adolescence, is normal, and 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. Adolescent girls often experience significant self-esteem issues related to physical changes and body image. Experts from the National Association for Self-Esteem note that poor self-esteem in adolescent girls puts them at high risk for the following statistics:

- 90% of eating disorders are found in girls
- 58% of girls admit to dieting
- 1 million girls under the age of 18 get pregnant annually
- 1 out of 10 eighth grade girls smokes daily
- 85% of girls experience sexual harassment in school
- 30% of adolescent girls have thoughts about suicide

Experts agree that a key cause in all of these statistics is lack of, or low, self-esteem.

Parents can play important roles in helping their children feel better about themselves, which in turn will lead to the development of greater confidence. To help build self-esteem start by:

Spending lots of time with your children, especially doing things they like and are good at.

Allowing your children to make decisions and choices, so they learn to be responsible and to trust themselves. 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.

Avoiding too much criticism. Blame and negative judgments are at the core of poor self-esteem and can lead to emotional disorders.

Helping your children to solve problems for themselves, and do not always rush to rescue them from frustrating situations.

Not responding to their statements of dissatisfaction with praise. If your son says he stinks at baseball, avoid saying “Oh don’t say that, you are a great baseball player.” Instead, acknowledge the feelings shown, and help him plan for a better performance the next time. The best praise you can give your child is praise of his or her own judgment.

Providing children with positive attention and praise for their accomplishments. This is important because 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.

Showing your children that you can laugh at yourself. Show them that life doesn’t need to be serious all the time and that sometimes we just have to laugh at ourselves. Your sense of humor is important for their well being.

Accepting your children for who they are, not who you want them to be. When you accept your entire child - the good and the bad - your child can accept his or herself.

Low self-esteem can have devastating consequences. It creates anxiety, stress, loneliness and an increased likelihood for depression. It can seriously impair academic and job performance as well as cause problems in relationships. Worst of all, these negative consequences themselves reinforce the poor self-image and cause a downward spiraling of lower and lower self-esteem. Although low self-esteem may take many forms, there are three common faces that someone with low self-esteem may wear:

The Imposter appears happy and successful, but is really terrified of failure. This person lives with the constant fear that people will see through him or her and “find out.” These individuals are prone to problems of perfectionism, procrastination, competition and burnout.

The Rebel claims to care less about what others think, especially authority figures. Those with this type of low self-esteem live with constant anger and feelings of inadequacy. They are always trying to prove that others’ judgment and opinions don’t hurt or affect them. These individuals are prone to excessive blaming of others, breaking rules or laws and fighting with authority.

The Lost Soul presents himself or herself as helpless and unable to cope with the world. Lost Souls look for others to rescue them and use self-pity as a shield against fear of taking responsibility for themselves and their life. These individuals are prone to under-achievement, excessively needing others in relationships, and lack of an ability to speak up for themselves.

It is never too late to build healthy, positive self-esteem! Sometimes just working to reframe a way of thinking in a positive manner can turn things around. Other times, when the emotional hurt is deeper or longer lasting, it may take the help of a mental health counselor to help one learn to love himself or herself, and uncover unique and special gifts. If you have concerns regarding your child’s or your own self-esteem, empower yourself, hit the book store, look for tools on the net, talk to someone and get help.

The purpose of this column is to provide you with some “tools” that can be used in a variety of households and situations. I encourage you to adapt what you have learned to meet your needs and the needs of your individual family. If you have any questions about this topic, or have a suggestion for another article, please contact me: Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor at I. E. Counseling 908-456-1871 or email me at hkbrogan@iecounseling.com

