

# Enhancing Self-Esteem in Children

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Self-esteem is a word we use to describe how we feel about ourselves. Self-esteem influences how we relate to the people and things in our world. We recognize the self-esteem of children in the way they meet challenges, in their sensitivity to difficulties, in their ability to tolerate pleasure without feeling guilty, in their receptivity to compliments and criticisms, in their openness to new experiences and in their ability to approach the world and get their needs met.

## **Recognizing Low Self-Esteem**

Many common problems of childhood are symptomatic of low self-esteem. Hitting, stealing, destructive behavior, lying and name-calling are all desperate and ineffective efforts to express feelings and get needs met. When they become strategies for getting recognition, the child soon adopts a negative view of him/herself and begins to feel that the only real recognition available to be obtained is recognition that confirms that he/she is naughty, unlovable, useless or bad.

We recognize low self-esteem in moody and apathetic children. Moody children are often overwhelmed with feelings they have no way to express, or they live in an environment that stifles the expression of those feelings. The slogan of the apathetic child is, "I don't care." But as with many of the things that children say, we must translate what they are saying into what they are trying to say, and when they say, "I don't care." they are usually trying to say, "I don't feel that anyone cares." With moody and apathetic children, a good place to begin is by listening.

Low self-esteem may be associated with a sudden drop in grades, promiscuous sexual acting-out, self-destructive behavior, anxiety, depression and drug taking. When relations to authority are based on fear rather than mutual respect, when peer relations are based on domination and antagonism rather than mutuality, when drugs are used as the only way out, we find low self-esteem. Finally it must be said that children who act in an entitled manner, announce to everyone that they are 'the best' and feel the world should cater to their every whim, do not have high self-esteem. They are very insecure and have a brittle and very low self-esteem as evidenced by their lack of empathy and poor frustration tolerance. They announce they are 'the best' as a rebuttal to an overriding inner feeling of being the worst.

## **Enhancing Self-Esteem**

Contrary to popular belief, praise alone does not build self-esteem. In fact, empty praise makes children feel useless and ineffective. Being effective in the world builds self-esteem. Being able to reach out to the world for comfort and stimulation builds self-esteem. Being able to effectively express one's thoughts and feelings, builds self-esteem. A role-defined responsiveness to your child builds self-esteem. 'Role-defined responsiveness' means recognizing and responding to your child as a parent. When a parent demands that the child comfort, console, and advise as a 'parent' to the parent, it is

not a role-defined responsiveness. When a parent treats the child as a 'peer', discusses adult concerns, physically assaults the child or takes the child to bed as a sexual partner, it is not a role-defined responsiveness. A parent resides hierarchically above the child. This means that the parent manages his or her adult needs for money, companionship, and sexuality while at the same time protecting, nurturing, guiding, educating and providing for the child.

### **Some Helpful Reminders For Enhancing Self Esteem**

Make the child's world small enough to be successful in and large enough to be challenging.

Make a place and time to honor your child's accomplishments.

Allow your child to be separate from you, have different interests from you, and have thoughts of his/her own.

Allow a socially appropriate freedom of expression.

Express an interest in your child's work and play without intruding or imposing.

Let children make their mistakes and learn from them.

Don't 'fix' their artwork.

Encourage them to be understanding of others and responsible for themselves.

Expect them to complete their homework and give them chores in the house that match their abilities.

Household chores confirm family roles and tell children that they belong to a group and that they are needed.

When in doubt, listen.

Avoid perfectionist attitudes. Expect mistakes and help your children learn from their mistakes. Some children with perfectionist attitudes feel they must be very, very good in order not to be very, very bad.

It is great to share but confusion about roles, privacy, bed space and the ownership and responsibility for books, clothes, and toys can be demoralizing.

Don't insult your child. Don't call your child "stupid," a "good for nothing," a "tramp," etc. Don't say he/she will never amount to anything. These are strong words and children remember them.

Don't lecture your child. Make your message short and to the point.

The way you deal with your frustrations is a model for your children. Whatever you do, your children are watching and learning.

Don't use your love as a weapon or a bribe. And don't coerce statements of love.

Get your adult needs for love, affection, and companionship from other adults, not from your children.

Broaden your children's vocabulary to include words that describe feeling states like frustration, disappointment, etc.

Your child is an expression of you, not an extension of you.

Children are not "bad." Their behavior is motivated. Ask yourself what it means.

Sometimes children get into trouble as a way of calling out for help.

Parents that are effective with their children feel good about themselves as parents.

Children that are effective in their schoolwork and in their relationships with their friends and family, feel good about themselves as children.

### **Parenting**

Parenting is the most important job in the world and one of the most difficult, as well. Its difficulties are underestimated and the job is regularly undervalued. Furthermore, parents are typically not provided with instructions or support for the work of childrearing. Give yourself credit for the job you do. Be a source of support and compliments to friends and family members who are also parents. Seek professional consultations when you feel the need and remember that parents can act as consultants to one another as well.

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