



Steps to Building a Child's Self-Esteem

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At one time or another, most parents ask themselves: "What can I do to help my child feel better about himself...to feel more confident...to view life positively?"

Positive self-esteem is a key to happiness and well-being in life.

If a child has high self-esteem, their chances of attaining their goals in life are increased. Let's consider more closely, then, the why and how of self-esteem...Why is self-esteem so important? How can parents assess children's feelings about themselves?

Exactly what is self-esteem? Is it really so important?

In simple words, self-esteem is composed of the thoughts, the feelings, and the ideas that a person has about themselves. It is their overall judgment of themselves. It is how much they like, accept and respect themselves. In one way or another most of the things a child or an adult does are directly related to their feelings about themselves. The friends they choose, their creativity, their achievement, their basic personality — all are affected by their concept of themselves.

Strong self-esteem is not only the foundation of sound mental health, but it is also important in charting a successful and happy life. Building a good self-image in our children is one of the most important jobs we do as parents.

Self-esteem is learned. It can be changed.

We are not born with high or low self-esteem. Instead our feelings about ourselves are learned from birth and continue over our lifetime. Our feelings are constantly revised upward or downward throughout life by the results of each additional experience.

High self-esteem is possible for any person. It is not linked to a family's wealth, education, social class, having mom at home, or to dad's occupation. What is important is the quality of the relationship that exists between a child and those who are important in their life.

Let's look at some of the important techniques that can build a feeling of self worth or high self-esteem in our children.

First, check your own feelings of self-worth.

Parents must feel secure and good about themselves before they can help their children reach this same goal. Parents with high self-esteem are most successful in creating homes where communication and family routines help children feel loved and important for their own special talents and qualities.

Give each child some undivided attention.

Taking time to focus full attention on your child is a way to say: "I care," "I have time for you." It means being with your child both physically and mentally. It means taking some time to be completely absorbed with your child.

Constant, intense involvement is not necessary or realistic. The important thing is to let your child know that he can count on this kind of attention at regular intervals. It may be necessary during especially busy periods to set up a definite time for these get-togethers. Special times of stress (during family moves, when a new baby arrives or upon entering school) often require extra periods of quality time with a child.

Respond to and value each child on the basis of her own personal characteristics...not in comparison to brothers, sisters or classmates. When a child feels that she is accepted and valued for the unique qualities she possesses, her sense of well being grows.

Be realistic in your expectations.

When expectations are realistic, it is easy for a child to experience success and feel personally valuable.

Repeated successes make a child feel more valuable and help build self-esteem. On the other hand, when expectations are too high or too rigid, parents often express disappointment in their child's actions. As disappointments mount up, they begin to eat away at a child's view of his own value and his self-esteem begins to diminish.

How do I know if my expectations are realistic?

Expectations for a child should be based on a child's age, personality, and current circumstances in which they are operating.

Start by checking your expectations with the basic facts of child development. Learn in a general way what children of a certain age are like. Learn about your child's current stage of development. By comparing your expectations with these general facts, try to determine if your goals are generally within reason. Then, recognizing that no child is "in general" or "average," check to see that you have adjusted your expectations to suit the needs, interests and environment of your child.

- Are you setting appropriate standards of achievement?
- Does your child understand how you want her to behave?
- Do you have realistic, clear rules for behavior?
- Does your child understand the rules?

Run a Check on Your Current Expectations

Ask yourself these questions.

- Why do I have this expectation?
- Where did it come from?
- Is it based on my wishes or my child's needs?
- Does it realistically fit this particular child...at this age...with their temperament and background?
- What purpose does it serve?
- Am I being fair?

Weed out the expectations that have no meaning for your child at his or her stage of development.

Focus on effort rather than the product.

Rather than wait until Mark cleans his whole room, comment on how well he is progressing. For example, you might say, "Mark, your room looks so much better since you've started hanging up your clothes."

Be positive and honest with your child.

Whenever possible, comment honestly and positively about what your child has done. Remember to tell him when he has done a good job.

If you feel that you can't comment honestly, perhaps you can encourage with a general statement such as: "You've worked hard today. I appreciate it!"

Avoid combining praise and constructive criticism. If you notice a child has not been careful in folding their clothes, ask them to do a similar task another time. Before starting the task, show them how to neatly fold clothes and put them away.

Keep in mind that positive responses are conveyed not only by words, but by actions as well. Warm smiles, happy hugs, and pats on the back help a child feel valued.

Be specific in your praise.

Have you ever gotten tired of saying "Great job," or "That's neat!"? After a while, these stock phrases become overused and don't convey our enthusiasm very well.

Focus on a specific thing you appreciate about the child's effort. For example, you might say "You worked hard to get that assignment done," or "Your writing is getting neat! er" Not only will your comments sound more sincere, you will help the child better understand what you appreciate about his or her performance.

Match your verbal and non-verbal messages of praise. A quick "That's great, Ann" as you start putting the dishes away is not likely to be interpreted as praise by a child. Children are more likely to believe your praise if you give them your undivided attention.

Praise in private and avoid comparisons.

Praising in private tells a child "I'm special" without embarrassing the child. It also avoids competition with other children.

Saying things like “Jenny got her chores done the fastest” suggests that only Jenny did a good job. Instead you might say “I’m glad you all got your chores done.”

Be careful of exaggerations.

“You’re the fastest runner in the whole world” may be offered with pride. But it is unlikely to be true. Saying “You ran faster today than you did yesterday” is both truthful and helpful.

Walk in your child’s shoes.

How we respond to our child and their behavior and how we express our feelings about them are critical factors in building up or tearing down their self image. Parents who learn to react to a situation without being judgmental encourage positive self-esteem.

Stop for a moment and consider how you normally respond to your child’s behavior. If your statements frequently begin with "you" it is likely that they include both a reaction to her behavior plus a judgment of her.

If they begin with "I," you most likely are directing your response to her behavior only. Put yourself in your child’s shoes! How would you feel after hearing each of these statements?

Situation	"You" Judgement	"I" Reaction
Your child's report card indicates achievement below your expectations.	"You're lazy."	"I'm worried about your grades."
A car almost hits your child in the street.	"You dope! Don't you know any better than to play in the street?"	"I'm so frustrated. I have repeatedly told you not to play in the street. I'm scared you'll get hurt."
Your child wins an art contest.	"You're such a good boy."	"I'm so proud of you and your drawings because they show how carefully you have been observing nature."

Encourage independence.

Children build self-confidence when they are permitted to participate in or make choices and decisions.

- Encourage children to be the final judge of their work. By helping children decide for themselves if they achieved their goals, you will encourage them to think for themselves. This will also avoid making them dependent on others for praise.
- Show respect for your children by allowing them to make decisions—and then respecting their decisions. Start with simple choices (which color of shirt to wear today). Gradually move to more difficult choices (choosing when to go to bed and when to wake up).
- Let children do for themselves what they are capable of doing safely (helping prepare a snack or meal, putting away laundry—even when you can do those things faster).
- Balance your need to protect with your child’s need to take risks and test her abilities to meet new challenges.
- Try not to rescue your child from difficult situations. Be available, in case you are needed — but resist the urge to step in unless the situation becomes unsafe. When children work through their own problems, their confidence grows.
- Help children learn the skills that will help them be successful in life
 - Work hard — knowing that failing is a part of learning.
 - Share
 - Manage anger and conflict
 - Manage stress in healthy ways

Characteristic Behaviors of Children and Youth With High and Low Self-Esteem

High Self-Esteem

- Makes friends with other children easily.
- Shows enthusiasm for new activities.
- Is cooperative and can usually follow reasonable rules.

- Largely responsible for control of own actions.
- Is creative, imaginative and has ideas of his own.
- Is happy, energetic; talks freely.
- Is independent, self-assured.
- Displays achievement consistent with ability.

Low Self-Esteem

- May be reluctant to enter new situations or try new activities.
- May easily become frustrated, angry or break out in tears.
- May withdraw or become overly aggressive to parents or other children.
- May do most things alone or cling to one friend.
- May be possessive of objects and make excessive demands on adult's time.
- Behavior does not suggest they are a happy child.
- May be reluctant to enter into activities that involve close personal contact.
- Regularly achieves at lower levels than "ability."

References

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