

Self Esteem Issues

What Is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem refers to how children feel about themselves and expect to be accepted and valued by others who are important to them. Because it is important for them to feel accepted, a healthy sense of self is crucial for determining how they will approach life and interact with others. Self-esteem represents an individual's need to belong and feel loved unconditionally; it is not just a happy positive idea about oneself, but rather a reflection of one's character and self-respect. It is assessed by an individual's ability to handle life situations and tasks and is interpreted by the individual from feedback received from others. For example, if children believe they are good readers, they will look for opportunities to improve and increase their reading skills; however, if they believe they have difficulties with reading, they will likely avoid tasks associated with reading and give up more easily when they are required to read.

Self-esteem has many aspects and develops within the context of a child's evolving sense of identity and the ever-changing life tasks and challenges he faces. It is a lifelong developmental process whose roots are established in early childhood. A child's sense of identity is developed through their view of acceptance, power, control, competence, and moral virtues. Children are active participants in their developing sense of self, which incorporates feedback received from parents, friends, siblings, teachers and classmates. Love, trust, autonomy, initiative, self-control, and the ability to interact socially all contribute to a lasting role in how children feel about themselves as individuals. They develop self-understanding and competence through their interactions with others, from which they construct a sense of self and personal value. Teaching children well developed coping skills and problem solving techniques reinforces positive self-esteem by enabling them to think strategically and achieve personally desired goals.

What Causes Low Self-Esteem?

Children with low self-esteem feel that important adults and peers in their lives have constantly judged them on their performances and successes. They generally feel unloved and only valued when they please their parents. Although all children have a need and desire for positive self-esteem, they either feel satisfied by the approval they receive from others, or are frustrated and feel unloved as a result of their disapproval. A parent's role should reflect one of a coach who realizes the full implications of their efforts on the child's developing sense of self and then acts accordingly to reinforce it. When they use overly exaggerated empty praise and cheers of well-intended support, they merely lend to teaching children to rely on others' judgments and opinions instead of forming their own beliefs based on their experiences. Low self-esteem also results from parents who only offer acceptance when a child completes a task or meets a standard; the child only feels worthwhile when the standard is met. Because these standards are conditional, a child's sense of self is not positively reassured and may then fear attempting new tasks in the future.

Although increasing self-esteem in children has been thought of as a cure for misbehaving children, parents must be conscious of not offering inflated or inappropriate praise. Children who hear how great they are regardless of their behaviors receive confusing, conflicting messages; these messages may induce feelings of grandiosity in the child. Parents and teachers might think this will increase the child's self-esteem, but being overly lenient and passive only increases their inner conflict and decreases their overall self-esteem. Although they may be fearful of setting limits for children who might become frustrated and angry, being too permissive decreases a child's personal sense of accomplishment and instills a false sense of self-importance.

Self-Esteem - The Early Childhood Years

Children up to the age of two are unaware of how to behave and are used to hearing the word "No." At this stage, a parent's goal is to help the child become autonomous and acknowledge that he is separate and individual. Although this is the stage of the "terrible twos," keep in mind the child's rebellious behavior is not to demonstrate disrespect, but rather recognize he is separate from his parents. Adjusting a child's environment to fit their needs and eliminating as many frustrations as possible can help develop a sense of autonomy; childproofing the home is one way to remove frustrating obstacles for the child. Also allow for adequate time to switch tasks by giving advance notice of when the child will be expected to eat lunch, brush his teeth, get dressed, go shopping, etc. When asking your child to complete a task, such as brushing their teeth, use positive suggestions like "Now it's time to let the toothbrush clean our teeth" instead of "Brush your teeth." v

Once children realize they are separate individuals, they will strive to be capable at mastering tasks themselves. Children ages three to six begin to realize they receive attention from others as they accomplish new tasks. Parents must be careful not to give tasks beyond their level of mastery, or feelings of incompetence will arise. Parents should provide opportunities for success for their children. Suggested tasks include using step stools to reach light switches and cabinets, low hanging hooks to help hang their clothes, plastic dinner dishes for meals, furniture that fits their body size, and space for outdoor recreational activities such as running, jumping, and climbing. Keep in mind that mastery of skills and tasks instills a sense of confidence in children.

As children during their first six years attempt to develop a sense of autonomy, attachment, and mastery, they are also learning to accept and understand their bodies, language, and the rules of the home. Although it is difficult at times to accept the noise, dirt, and messes children make, try to remain focused on providing safe outlets for children's growth while protecting your home and peace of mind.

Self-Esteem - The Middle Years

Children ages six to twelve are developing their identity from family reflections and are not yet evaluating themselves for distinct adolescent or puberty changes. The middle years are an extension of the first six, but focus more intently on autonomy, mastery, and defining who they are from relationships outside the family, such as playmates. Overall acceptance from their

playmates and mastery of physical and social skills add to a child's increasing sense of self. Children ages eight to ten need to be exposed to an adult role model of the same sex. For girls, this is usually easier because most divorced mothers have primary custody and women, such as elementary school teachers generally surround children more. In divorced families there may be fewer options for boys, and it is rare that a distant relative may fulfill this role. If models are not readily available, children may seek out a scout leader, television hero, or same-sex sibling, but it is important to seek out a substitute so the child has an adult model to follow.

The middle years are a time for developing physical, social and academic competence. Parents should become familiar with their child's activities at school and help them with their homework. Parents should encourage their children to interact socially with other children their age and join activity groups that interest them. Allow children to invite their friends into your home and make them feel welcome. Refrain from assigning too many chores or responsibilities to your child, allowing time for him to spend time with friends and allow his sense of self to grow.

Self-Esteem - Adolescence

Adolescence is the time of identity development, when relationships and school identities contribute in different ways. As adolescence proceeds, thoughts about relationships increase, prospects about college emerge, and thoughts formalize about occupational choices. One significant differentiating characteristic between childhood and adolescence lies within the realm of friends and peers. As the role of parents as primary caregivers starts to fade, peers begin to replace parents as the most important reference point in their lives.

Although many parents have negative reactions to the word "teenager," parents must remember the major task for adolescents is to reevaluate who they are and how their bodies and identities have changed. They strive to establish final independence from their families and others their age to become their own person. They struggle to understand the meaning of life and how to interact with others of the opposite sex. They are faced with answering the question of how they want to spend the rest of their lives or if they are going to prepare for college or directly enter an occupation. How they see themselves strongly influences their options for their future. They strongly desire group acceptance more so than the middle years and become aware of their insecurities. Teenagers are faced with group pressures, such as conforming to group opinions in order to "fit in." Withstanding some group pressures comes easier for adolescents who feel they are more adequate and worthy, which demonstrates their level of confidence in themselves.

Parents must remember that intense rebellion and disrespect is not necessarily a part of adolescence, but a cry for independence. As parents prepare for their children to progress into adulthood and leave the home, they should be encouraged to see themselves first as individuals and second as parents, again reinforcing their sense of autonomy and 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. Recommended interventions include utilizing professional services for individual or family counseling, group therapy, and parent workshops.

What Are The Implications of Low Self-Esteem?

- Child/Teen/Individual

Children who have chronically low self-esteem tend to agree with others' negative evaluations and opinions of themselves, although they would prefer to think of themselves in a more positive manner. They tend to value themselves to the extent they have felt valued. They lose interest in mastering skills and tasks and continuously compare themselves to others, which results in feelings of worthlessness and the expectation of failing at most attempted tasks.

- Family

The family is widely seen as an important influence on self-esteem because it is where the initial sense of oneself is formed. The effects of low self-esteem on the family can be reflected outward toward siblings and parents through verbal or physical expression.

Children with self-esteem difficulties have absorbed what parents and others have negatively said about them. As they begin to define themselves in light of their low sense of self, they may undertake the view that they are different from their peers and siblings.

Although at times children may not be aware they are different, they know they feel awkward and inept when compared to others, particularly higher achieving siblings. Their inner tension and shame can lead them to act out in various ways, ranging from

emotional and physical withdrawal to aggressive and combative outward behaviors.

- School

Children with low self-esteem appear hesitant and uncomfortable in the classroom. They tend to only answer direct questions and prefer to keep their opinions to themselves because they fear others' reactions. Guarded behaviors and minimal interactions with other classmates lessen their social impact on others, which reinforces their belief of having nothing to offer others.

- Community

Children or individuals with low self-esteem hesitate when interacting with groups of neighborhood kids or joining social activities, such as parties or games. They generally wait to be invited to play or join others, but then only participate minimally when they agree to play. Their guardedness and self-doubt hold them back from fully interacting with others, again reinforcing their negative self-image.

How Is Low Self-Esteem Expressed?

Low self-esteem is expressed through the need to constantly impress others by seeking their approval. When negative feedback is repeatedly offered to a child with low self-esteem, he begins to believe the negative evaluations as truth about his abilities and self-worth. These negative evaluations then become direct reflections of the child's belief that they are incapable, unsuccessful, and unworthy. There are two common low self-esteem responses: 1) to feel reserved, incompetent and worthless; 2) to feel angry and desire to get even with others. Individuals who feel down generally feel unsuccessful and overwhelmed by the tasks of life. They are shy, tend to remain where they feel safe, and try to find ways of escaping unpleasant realities or situations. Angry responses to low self-esteem include constantly finding fault with the world, being negative about everything, and taking things out on others. Since their behavior generally reflects their self-image, their misbehavior is derived from their negative self-concept; a child who believes he is bad portrays his behaviors to fit his self-view. The more he misbehaves and the more anger, punishment, or rejection he receives, the more his belief is reinforced that he is a bad child. How children express self-esteem difficulties depends upon their personal experiences and varies among individuals. Some children express more emotional or behavioral difficulties while at school, whereas others may express them at home.

The following profile illustrates a child who has low self-esteem:

Sue is a seventh grader who is an average student. Her teacher refers to her as "reserved and quiet." She has minimal friendships, completes half of her homework assignments, and perceives herself as being less competent academically when compared to her peers. She becomes frustrated and gives up easily on tasks she feels she will never master. She constantly seeks the approval of other adults, but then focuses on and emphasizes any negative feedback she receives. She interprets her parent and teacher's frustrations as indicating she is a "bad" child, which

reinforces her core belief she is a bad child. Her negative view of self influences her outlook on life and keeps her from developing new interests and attempting new tasks.

Intervention Options

Individual Therapy – Usually once per week – ideal for identifying and addressing negative core beliefs of individuals. Very helpful for children who wish to speak with someone outside the immediate family. Cognitive therapy is very beneficial for children with low self-esteem and depression. Specifically seek out a therapist who specializes in children or adolescents.

Family Counseling – Usually once per week - good for addressing family issues and examining family roles, structure, and values.

Group Therapy – Usually once per week for 60-90 minutes. Good for education about self-esteem, its origins, and for social interaction with others who share similar beliefs about themselves. Check with the child's school psychologist for available related groups.

Parent Workshops - Usually offered at various times and places. Check with school resources, therapist referrals, psychiatric hospitals, local support groups, local college or university childhood education departments, or community organizations.

Potential Resources

- Behavioral health professionals (including psychologists, social workers, counselors, and psychiatrists)
 - School psychologists, counselors, and teachers
 - Your family doctor or pediatrician
 - Your minister, rabbi, bishop, or priest
 - Parent support groups
- our health insurance company (look for 'behavioral health services' or 'mental/nervous services' listed in your health benefits booklet)
 - Community information-referral services

Self-Esteem Enhancers For Parents

- Value Your Child Unconditionally

Accepting a child regardless of their strengths and weaknesses is pertinent for expressing unconditional love to them. This must also be reinforced by the amount of quality time (focused attention) spent with a child each day. Although it is not feasible for a parent to designate all of their attention to a child, it is necessary to spend at least 20 minutes of quality time three to four times per week. Throughout the week parents can continuously express their interest and attention by offering hugs and smiles.

- Set Your Child Up To Succeed

Allow children to accept themselves by showing that you accept who they are, including their strengths and weaknesses. Explore the child's interests and successes in academics, athletics, and artistic and musical abilities. Use their areas of strength to reinforce their successes, and refrain from comparing siblings to each other.

- Empower Your Child

Convey to children they will not have to worry about losing the security of their parent's acceptance, which will encourage them to pursue new tasks and opportunities for self-development. Provide opportunities and projects for them, and encourage positive exploration of new subject areas and activities that are of interest to them.

- Help Your Child Develop Good Social Skills

Model and demonstrate basic social skills such as listening, taking turns when speaking, respect, accountability, and appropriate ways to make and maintain friendships. Provide the rationale and necessity for each skill and behavior and ensure understanding of each skill.

- Use Language That Builds Self-Esteem

Speak to children with phrases that build self-esteem, such as, "Thank you for helping," or "That was an excellent idea." Avoid using negative phrases that decrease self-esteem such as "How many times have I told you?" or "Why are you so stupid?"

- Encourage Your Child To Be A Thinker

Encourage children to be creative by exploring subject areas or ideas that are fun and interesting. Offer avenues for them to explore their interests, such as field trips to libraries, museums, or bookstores. Talk with your children and take part in their excitement about what they are reading, thinking, and doing.

- Have Realistic Expectations and Goals For Your Child

When parents repeatedly expect more than a child can do, they are disappointed again and again, sending a message to the child to be disappointed in himself. Having realistic expectations provides children with a sense of control over themselves, their surroundings, and their future. Children's development of self-control goes hand-in-hand with self-esteem, which increases as they achieve success when realistic and attainable goals are completed. When children successfully meet the challenges within their phase of self-identity, they become convinced of their self-worth and competence.

- Teach Your Child To Delay Gratification

Explain the importance and feeling of accomplishment when one works toward and completes a specific task or goal. Give recognition, a special privilege, or increased responsibility for a job well done.

- Be A Role Model Yourself

Let your children know that you feel good about yourself and that you can make mistakes and learn from them. Provide numerous opportunities to demonstrate basic judgment and moral values (respect, kindness, sharing), how to display appropriate behavior and interact with others, and how to constructively solve problems when they arise. Set a good example by demonstrating respect to others, to schools, and to yourself.

- Show Them They Are Important

Show your children what they do is important to you. Talk with them daily about their day's activities, interests, and schoolwork. Attend their athletic events, parent's day at school, musical concerts, and award ceremonies. Be available to support them and what activities they chose to do.

Suggestions For Teachers

When building self-esteem, families and schools are natural partners. Working together closely with teachers can significantly increase a child's sense of confidence. Sensitivity to the needs of children has often been sacrificed to the external pressures of maintaining classroom management and achievement. Engaging children in valuable and challenging tasks allows both children and teachers to work together, increasing a child's overall self-esteem.

- Make homework and attendance at school a top priority.
- Use honest and authentic feedback to address specific children's behaviors, which will help them to grow and change. Avoid using general comments such as "good job" and "you'll do better next time." Offer several opportunities for children to succeed.
- Instill confidence in children by allowing them to make choices, understand consequences, and accept the outcome or results. When children get respect, they give respect. When they feel good about themselves, they feel good about others.
- Classroom values should be emphasized to incorporate mutual respect, cooperation, empathy, and fairness. Teachers should discuss, model, and role-play these values. Parents can help children to get along with their classmates by collaborating with teachers by explaining and modeling appropriate behaviors.
- Classroom values should recognize the special identity of each individual in conjunction with their ability to contribute to the larger social good of the classroom.
- Rewards should be task-oriented, encouraging effort and self-improvement. Extrinsic rewards, such as gifts or pizza, are generally ineffective ways of building self-esteem. Intrinsic rewards, such as genuine feedback and praise, have a more significant impact on children's overall sense of self.

"Brad" – A Case Example

Many children experience low self-esteem while they are having academic difficulties. The following case illustrates a child with reading problems and interventions that helped to increase his overall sense of self:

Brad is a fourth grader who has dyslexia, a significant reading disability. He made up several excuses to avoid reading, including saying he had headaches and had to go to the nurse's office during reading time. He eventually began to believe that the idea of reading alone gave him a headache. Brad has a low estimate of his ability and worth and avoids having to read at all costs. He began to believe a cycle of self-defeating thoughts: the more he avoided reading, the stronger he felt he could not read, the worse he did on reading tasks. While his reason for not enjoying reading is understandable, his self-defeating thoughts about being a competent reader made his disability worse. To help Brad's situation, his teacher, parents, and school psychologist designed a plan to help increase his self-esteem and confidence in reading.

First, they provided Brad with reading material that was slightly below what he could normally read and understand. By implementing this, Brad began to experience success with reading again. Brad was also paired with another student who was having reading difficulty but had continued reading and was making progress. He received positive feedback from both his teacher and parents for completing the task. His teacher implemented a program recognizing good effort on difficult tasks in the classroom, which became a support to Brad. Brad was instructed to deal with his headaches by rubbing his temples and placing his head on the table. He understood his headaches to be a bodily reaction to his thoughts of reading being too difficult to master. The psychologist used some guided imagery to work with Brad in understanding that although reading was hard, he could think of it as being something important he had to do.

Within six weeks Brad's parents and teacher noticed significant changes. He was no longer having headaches and did not try to avoid reading. He slowly began to volunteer to read in class as his reading skills increased. Although he was not yet at grade level, his progress was increasing and he believed he could read. Brad's case is a good example of how self-esteem is dependent on evaluations of our accomplishments and the feedback we receive from others. Additionally, Brad's parents demonstrated their unconditional love regardless of his reading difficulties or desire to give up easily, leaving him to feel valued by them.

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Related Articles - Self Esteem

[The depressed child](#)

Not only adults become depressed. Children and teenagers also may have depression, which is a treatable illness. Depression is defined as an illness when the feelings of depression persist and interfere with a child or adolescent's ability to function.

[The Problem of Poor Self-Esteem in Children and Measures to Help Improve it](#)

There exists a growing body of evidence to suggest that the many challenges - academic, financial, environmental, and psychological - that create so much stress and strain in our embattled school system, may all be underwritten and aggravated by a poor self image on the part of a considerable number of pupils.

[How to Give Your Child the Gift of Self Esteem](#)

Helping your child grow up with strong self-esteem is the most important task of parenthood. As a parent, you are the primary influence on how your child feels about herself--her self-esteem.

[About Self-Esteem in Children.](#)

For your children: listen, accept, discipline, and set limits for self-esteem. Use the language of self-esteem and allow independent decisions for a positive child with positive self-esteem. Kids need acceptance to develop positive esteem.

[Teenage Girls Today More Independent, Yet Lack Self Esteem](#)

Teenage girls today are more independent and see greater opportunities available to them than their baby boomer parents did at their age, according to a survey of health educators by The Vagisil Women's Health Center(SM). Yet, these same girls also have less self-confidence and weaker self-images than their parents' generation, the survey, which was conducted at the annual convention of the American Association for Health Education (AAHE), indicated.

[How Can We Strengthen Children's Self-Esteem?](#)

Most parents want their young children to have a healthy sense of self-esteem. That desire can also be seen in education--schools around the country include self-esteem among their goals. Many observers believe that low self-esteem lies at the bottom of many of society's problems.

[Build your child's Self-Esteem](#)

Self-esteem refers to how you feel about yourself. It includes such things as your self-confidence, self-respect, pride in yourself, your independence and your self-reliance. All the

ways you feel about yourself and your abilities are wrapped up in the term "self-esteem".

[Tips for Developing Healthy Self-Esteem In Your Child](#)

Most parents are aware that their child's feelings of self-worth are linked with their success socially and academically. But, sometimes parents are unaware of how easy it is to damage their child's self-esteem without even realizing it. Research shows that children with learning disabilities are more likely to suffer from lack of self-esteem than their peers.

Advocacy Organizations - Self Esteem

National Association for the Education of Young Children

1509 16Th St., NW
Washington, DC 20036
Phone Number: (800) 424-2460

ERIC Clearing House on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, University of Illinois

805 W. Pennsylvania Ave.
Urbana, IL 61801-4897
Phone Number: (800) 583-4135

Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children

PO Box 665
Annandale, VA 22003-0665
Phone Number: (703) 914-3929

American Psychological Association

750 First St., NE
Washington, DC 20002-4242
Phone Number: (202) 336-5500 or (800) 374-2721
<http://www.apa.org/concept/children>

Self Esteem Related Web Links

Positively MAD: The Positively MAD team offer a new approach to increase the awareness of young people to what they are becoming by fulfilling the mission: "To affect the lives of children and young people by giving them and those who support them, access to information and resources that can Positively Make A Difference for them"

<http://www.positivelymad.co.uk/>

Self Esteem Related Books and References

[200 Ways to Raise a Girl's Self-Esteem:...](#)

by Will Glennon

Studies show that young girls often develop faster than their male counterparts, grasping concepts such as math and sports just as easily -- until they reach early adolescence.

[Boost Your Child's Self-Esteem: Simple,...](#)

by Karin Ireland

What does your child see in the mirror?

...The answer will make a real difference in his or her life--now and in the future. This book offers parents powerful and simple ways to build a child's self-esteem and individual confidence, while encouraging a healthy regard for the needs and opinions of others. It shows how to develop a foundation of integrity and inner strength--one that will protect them and help them navigate life's daily challenges.

[Bringing Up Kids Without Tearing Them...](#)

by Kevin Leman

Bringing Up Kids Without Tearing Them Down is packed with real life examples and the tools parents need to underwrite their kids' lives with a solid sense of self-worth and confidence. Often the very things parents do to develop self-esteem in their children actually does just the opposite--Dr. Leman helps parents avoid that.

[No One to Play With](#)

by Betty Osman & Henriette Blinder

Describes the problems children with learning disabilities face every day, including getting along with others and dealing with family crises.

[Nurturing Good Children Now: 10 Basic...](#)

by Ron Taffel, with Melinda Blau

In these difficult, sometimes violent, times, how can we nurture children who are both good and happy? How can we help them stay safe, be respectful, and reach their full potential? Nurturing Good Children Now outlines precisely what is important to foster in our kids, and how to raise children who have a deep sense of values and an enthusiastic spirit. The most essential traits that children need to thrive in today's world are: mood mastery, expressiveness, peer smarts, body comfort, team intelligence, respect, passion, focus, caution, gratitude.

[Positive Self-Talk for Children:...](#)

by Douglas Bloch with Jon Merri

A step-by-step guide to helping children build self-esteem, a sense of independence, and greater optimism provides affirmations for every stage in a child's development and features chapters that help adults deal with their own negative tendencies.

Reaching Minds
by Mel Levine, M.D.

Helps parents understand the signal of children struggling to keep up in school and offers solution-based advice and strategies (also available on audiotape). To order: Educators Publishing Service, Inc., \$22.00, (800) 225-5750.

[Self-Esteem Games : 300 Fun Activities...](#)
by Barbara Sher and Ralph Butler (Illustrator)

Self-esteem games show children how wonderful it can be to be themselves —emotionally, socially, physically, and intellectually. By sharing the upbeat, thoughtful activities in Self-esteem Games, you can reinforce your child's positive feelings and provide a lasting foundation for learning.

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