SELF-ESTEEM IN CHILDREN: STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

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One of the goals of education and parenting is to help children lead productive lives. Helping children feel good about themselves is a reasonable educational objective. Educators hope that school experiences will help children develop a sense of personal competency and self-esteem, while caregivers and parents hope that children will express positive feelings and ideas about themselves as they move through childhood into adulthood. How does a child acquire a healthy sense of self? How can parents, caregivers, and teachers help youngsters develop self-esteem?

What Is Self-Esteem

Some define *self-esteem* as what we think and feel about ourselves. It is our self-evaluation and our sense of self-worth. Sometimes the terms *self-esteem* and *self-concept* are used interchangeably. Some researchers have written that self-concept includes the qualities, capabilities, and ways of thinking that define a person. Self-esteem is sometimes defined as a part of self-concept that comprises self-evaluations. For example, a child may say, "I am a good reader" or "I am a slow runner."

Self-esteem may be used to predict how a person will act in the future. For example, when a child agrees with statements such as, "I feel uncomfortable when I am with people I don't know," he or she may be sharing a history of feeling uneasy in new social situations. In new social situations, it is likely that the child may feel awkward and so may tend to avoid people and environments that are unfamiliar. On the other hand, when a child agrees with a statement such as, "I am a good friend," he or she may be reflecting a history of positive peer relationships and a high probability of success in new social situations.

Self-esteem is a multidimensional construct. Overall feelings of self-worth are often called *global self-esteem*. Global self-esteem includes all the dimensions of an individual's talents, capabilities, accomplishments, and personality. This may include academic self-esteem, social self-esteem, physical self-esteem, and several other areas that are still being studied. As children grow and experience the world, the parts of self-esteem become more distinct. Children's self-esteem may vary among different domains. For example, a child may have high academic self-esteem but lower physical self-esteem; a child might regard himself or herself as a talented musician but poor in math or spelling.

Children with low self-esteem are usually described as being hesitant to take risks or move out of their comfort zone. They often talk and think negatively about themselves. In contrast, children with very high self-esteem may be described as cocky, boastful, or arrogant. Persons with extremely high self-esteem are often perceived as threatening and aggressive. Having healthy self-esteem is a balance between being too guarded and too egotistical; it is also a balance between thinking too negatively or too positively about oneself.

Self-esteem is related to a number of life factors. Healthy self-esteem is related to experiencing school success, feeling happy and satisfied, making healthy lifestyle choices, having rewarding relationships, and demonstrating effective coping skills. Low self-esteem is related to several physical and mental health disorders such as eating disorders, depression, and anxiety. In addition, low self-esteem may result from interpersonal problems, loneliness, gang membership, obesity, suicidal tendencies, and teen pregnancy.

Development of Healthy Self-Esteem

How a child develops self-esteem is complex and somewhat elusive. Research suggests that self-esteem may be related to a child's temperament, which is probably inherited or otherwise biologically determined. Generally, children tend to have one or a combination of three temperaments: easy (tend to be cheerful and adaptive), difficult (tend to be slow to adapt and have intense or negative reactions),

and slow to warm up (tend to be less active and appear low key). Children with slow-to-warm-up temperaments may be hesitant or cautious. They do not necessarily have a low self-esteem but may need more time to adapt to expectations and environments.

Research also suggests that much of the influence over an individual's self-esteem comes from early positive experiences with parents or other significant individuals. In the long run, ethnicity or race, social class, and gender seem to have little effect on global self-esteem. However, cultural values may influence how self-esteem is perceived. For example, western cultures tend to value individualism, extroversion, and physical appearance and equate these qualities with healthy self-esteem. Children from eastern cultures are encouraged to be modest and tend to hold back positive evaluations of themselves.

Although distinct successes and failures, rejections and acceptances, and appearance have a moderate effect on self-esteem, self-esteem is relatively stable. Losing a soccer game or failing a test probably will not be devastating to a child's self-esteem, but an ongoing pattern of failure in many areas over an extended period without helpful adult support may affect a child's sense of self.

Children are affected by how much they feel accepted, liked, and loved, especially by parents and significant others. However, children also need relationships with adults who have high and reasonable expectations for their behavior, who help them meet those expectations, and who let them learn from their mistakes. Regardless of a child's early experiences or home environment, both teachers and parents can help children develop a healthy self-esteem.

How Adults Help Children Develop Healthy Self-Esteem

Value children. Adults who express unconditional positive regard and acceptance for children create an atmosphere that promotes optimistic attitudes and a willingness to take risks. Parents who express unconditional love and acceptance for their children tend to have children who develop a secure sense of who they are. Children need to know that even when they make mistakes and experience failure they are valued by others and are loved, especially by significant adults in their lives. They also need to know that they are valued because of their relationships with adults, not for their perfect math paper, wonderful artwork, their place on the honor roll, or the lead role in the school play. One of the best ways for parents to send the message that they value their children is to spend time together in an activity of the child's choice. When children know that parents value them enough to spend time with them, they can feel they have inherent worth.

Listen to children. Adults should listen carefully to the children's experiences and opinions. When a child has hurt feelings or is frightened, adults can acknowledge the feeling by saying, "I can see that you are sad. I'd like to hear about what happened." Adults must listen carefully to the child without interrupting and should not tell the child how to feel. They must avoid responses such as, "Oh, that's silly to feel sad about not being invited to your friend's birthday party. You'll get over it; it's not a big deal." Listening thoughtfully and respectfully helps children to learn to trust themselves and their feelings.

Set appropriate boundaries and expectations. Parents and teachers who set firm and consistent boundaries for children's behavior tend to create environments that are reasonable and predictable, where children feel safe to explore and take risks. When children know specifically what is expected of them, they are more likely to meet those expectations, creating a sense of security. When adults have high and reasonable standards for behavior, and they discipline with warmth and caring, most children will respond with appropriate behaviors that meet the adult's expectations and help the children develop a sense of competency. When rules are broken, the consequences should not be harsh or cruel, but should be administered in a way that maintains the child's self-respect. Being firm, consistent, and emotionally warm and responsive are hallmarks of good classroom management and good parenting.

Teach problem-solving skills. Rescuing children from their mistakes or failures tends to teach them that they are not capable of solving their problems and that they need adults to rescue them. Children who are not held accountable for their mistakes do not learn how to solve problems and may learn to blame others for their mistakes. If a child gets in trouble at school, adults can help the child acknowledge the mistake and brainstorm ways to solve the problem. Then they should let the child take the lead in correcting the problem, providing support if needed. Adults can listen to a child's feelings about the situation, but they should avoid shaming the child or faulting others. Focusing on solving the problem rather than blaming creates feelings of competency. From this, a child learns that we all make mistakes and can learn from experiencing failure, that most problems can be fixed, and that other people will still care about us.

Praise effort. Praise children in ways that acknowledge their efforts and focus on the process as well as the outcome. For example, when a child shows improvement in math a teacher can say, "I can tell you worked very hard on this math assignment. I appreciate

how much you tried." Children can consistently produce effort, although the outcome of their efforts is not always guaranteed. If an adult says something such as, "I knew you were the smartest student in math!" yet the child knows there are times when he or she is not the smartest student in math, the student may discount the praise and develop a sense of distrust when others express their approval. Empty praise and flattery that are not grounded in reality and are not evidenced in the child's experience tend to do more harm than good by discounting the expectations and standards for responsible, productive behavior. Frequent unearned praise may also lead children to rely on external praise rather than on their own evaluations of their accomplishments.

Effective praise is specific and describes what the child did well. Instead of "Good job," teachers can say, "I like the way you completed this project. It was turned in before the due date, and your drawings help me understand your ideas. What do you like about how this project turned out?" In a similar manner, parents or caregivers can say, "I like the way you cleaned your room. The way you made your bed is especially neat, and your clothes are folded nicely in your closet. You did a fine job. What do you like about the way it looks?" Children need to learn to experience internal satisfaction for their efforts and accomplishments rather than expecting external approval and rewards for everything they do.

Provide opportunities for success. Experiencing success is important. When children only experience failure they may begin to doubt themselves. If a child's academic skills are below classroom expectations and the child has a sense of continuing failure, teachers can respond by creating assignments and projects at the child's current skill level or adjusting assignments so that the child experiences success. One of the most effective ways for children to see their success is through charting their improvement. For example, if a child is struggling with learning multiplication facts, the teacher can chart the child's progress in successfully completing multiplication tests or worksheets. Seeing tangible evidence of progress helps children feel proud of their improving skills.

Likewise, parents can help children choose activities that are developmentally appropriate and that provide opportunities for children to feel successful. Learning a musical instrument or playing on a sports team can help children receive recognition for constructive behaviors. It is important for parents to choose activities that are developmentally appropriate and reflect the child's personal strengths.

Children often feel successful when they provide service in their homes, schools, and communities. Learning to help others gives children a sense that they have something important to give and also provides a sense of belonging. An older child who is having difficulty reading may experience success by tutoring a younger child, which, in turn, increases the tutor's reading skills.

Conclusion

Helping children develop self-esteem is a matter of helping them gather evidence that they are competent and capable. This evidence needs to be genuine and based on experience. When adults create opportunities for children to take risks and experience success, they are helping them develop a sense of self-worth. When children make mistakes, they need supportive adults who do not rescue them from the consequences but teach them to solve problems and express confidence that they will do better next time. Overall, children need to know that they are cared for and valued.

Resources

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Website

Kids Health—*http://kidshealth.org*
See: *http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/self_esteem.html*

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