

DEVELOPING YOUR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM

Healthy self-esteem is like a child's armor against the challenges of the world. Kids who know their strengths and weaknesses and feel good about themselves seem to have an easier time handling conflicts and resisting negative pressures. They tend to smile more readily and enjoy life. These kids are realistic and generally optimistic.

In contrast, kids with low self-esteem can find challenges to be sources of major anxiety and frustration. Those who think poorly of themselves have a hard time finding solutions to problems. If given to self-critical thoughts such as "I'm no good" or "I can't do anything right," they may become passive, withdrawn, or depressed. Faced with a new challenge, their immediate response might be "I can't."

What Is Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem is similar to self-worth (how much a person values himself or herself). This can change from day to day or from year to year, but overall self-esteem tends to develop from infancy and keep going until we are adults.

Self-esteem also can be defined as feeling capable while also feeling loved. A child who is happy with an achievement but does not feel loved may eventually experience low self-esteem. Likewise, a child who feels loved but is hesitant about his or her own abilities can also develop low self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem comes when a good balance is maintained.

Patterns of self-esteem start very early in life. The concept of success following effort and persistence starts early. Once people reach adulthood, it's harder to make changes to how they see and define themselves.

So, it's wise to think about developing and promoting self-esteem during childhood. As kids try, fail, try again, fail again, and then finally succeed, they develop ideas about their own capabilities. At the same time, they're creating a self-concept based on interactions with other people. This is why parental involvement is key to helping kids form accurate, healthy self-perceptions.

Parents and caregivers can promote healthy self-esteem by showing encouragement and enjoyment in many areas. Avoid focusing on one specific area; for example, success on a spelling test, which can lead to kids feeling that they're only as valuable as their test scores.

Signs of Unhealthy and Healthy Self-Esteem

Self-esteem fluctuates as kids grow. It's frequently changed and fine-tuned, because it is affected by a child's experiences and new perceptions. So it helps to be aware of the signs of both healthy and unhealthy self-esteem.

Kids with low self-esteem may not want to try new things and may speak negatively about themselves: "I'm stupid," "I'll never learn how to do this," or "What's the point? Nobody cares about me anyway." They may exhibit a low tolerance for frustration, giving up easily or waiting for somebody else to take over. They tend to be overly critical of and easily disappointed in themselves.

Kids with low self-esteem see temporary setbacks as permanent, intolerable conditions, and a sense of pessimism prevails. This can place kids at risk for stress and mental health problems, as well as real difficulties solving different kinds of problems and challenges they encounter.

Kids with healthy self-esteem tend to enjoy interacting with others. They're comfortable in social settings and enjoys group activities as well as independent pursuits. When challenges arise, they can work toward finding solutions and voice discontent without belittling themselves or others. For example, rather than saying, "I'm an idiot," a child with healthy self-esteem says, "I don't understand this." They know their strengths and weaknesses, and accept them. A sense of optimism prevails.

How Parents Can Help

How can a parent help to foster healthy self-esteem in a child? These tips can make a big difference:

Be careful what you say. Kids can be sensitive to parents' and others' words. Remember to praise your child not only for a job well done, but also for effort. But be truthful. For example, if your child doesn't make the soccer team, avoid saying something like, "Well, next time you'll work harder and make it." Instead, try "Well, you didn't make the team, but I'm really proud of the effort you put into it." Reward effort and completion instead of outcome.

Sometimes, a child's skill level is just not there — so helping kids overcome disappointments can really help them learn what they're good at and what they're not so good at. As adults, it's OK to say "I can't carry a tune" or "I couldn't kick a ball to save my life," so use warmth and humor to help your kids learn about themselves and to appreciate what makes them unique.

Be a positive role model. If you're excessively harsh on yourself, pessimistic, or unrealistic about your abilities and limitations, your kids might eventually mirror you. Nurture your own self-esteem and they'll have a great role model.

Identify and redirect inaccurate beliefs. It's important for parents to identify kids' irrational beliefs about themselves, whether they're about perfection, attractiveness, ability, or anything else. Helping kids set more accurate standards and be more realistic in evaluating themselves will help them have a healthy self-concept.

Inaccurate perceptions of self can take root and become reality to kids. For example, a child who does very well in school but struggles with math may say, "I can't do math. I'm a bad student." Not only is this a false generalization, it's also a belief that can set a child up for failure. Encourage kids to see a situation in a more objective way. A helpful response might be: "You are a good student. You do great in school. Math is a subject that you need to spend more time on. We'll work on it together."

Be spontaneous and affectionate. Your love will help boost your child's self-esteem. Give hugs and tell kids you're proud of them when you can see them putting effort toward something or trying something at which they previously failed. Put notes in your child's lunchbox with messages like "I think you're terrific!"

Give praise often and honestly, but without overdoing it. Having an inflated sense of self can lead kids and teens to put others down or feel that they're better than everyone else, which can be socially isolating.

Give positive, accurate feedback. Comments like "You always work yourself up into such a frenzy!" will make kids feel like they have no control over their outbursts. A better statement is, "I can see you were very angry with your brother, but it was nice that you were able to talk about it instead of yelling or hitting." This acknowledges a child's feelings, rewards the choice made, and encourages the child to make the right choice again next time.

Create a safe, loving home environment. Kids who don't feel safe or are abused at home are at greatest risk for developing poor self-esteem. A child who is exposed to parents who fight and argue repeatedly may feel they have no control over their environment and become helpless or depressed.

Also watch for signs of abuse by others, problems in school, trouble with peers, and other

factors that may affect kids' self-esteem. Encourage your kids to talk to you or other trusted adults about solving problems that are too big to solve by themselves.

Help kids become involved in constructive experiences. Activities that encourage cooperation rather than competition are especially helpful in fostering self-esteem. For example, mentoring programs in which an older child helps a younger one learn to read can do wonders for both kids. Volunteering and contributing to your local community can have positive effects on self-esteem for everyone involved.

When promoting healthy self-esteem, it's important to not have too much or too little but "just enough." Make sure your kids don't end up feeling that if they're average or normal at something, it's the same as not being good or special.

Finding Professional Help

If you suspect your child has low self-esteem, consider getting professional help. Child and adolescent therapists and counselors can help identify coping strategies to help deal with problems at school or home in ways that help kids feel better about themselves.

Therapy can help kids learn to view themselves and the world more realistically and help with problem-solving. Developing the confidence to understand when you can deal with a problem and when to ask for help is vital to positive self esteem.

Taking responsibility and pride in who you are is a sure sign of healthy self-esteem and the greatest gift parents can give to their child.