



Self-Esteem

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Parenting Made Easier...



fcs.okstate.edu/parenting

Credit is extended to Elaine Wilson, retired Parenting Specialist, for the original development of this fact sheet.

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Many factors work together to build self-esteem.



- Self-concept
- Positive discipline
- Friendships, especially best friends
- Parents with high self-esteem
- Success and a sense of accomplishment
- Acceptance

Self-esteem is your view of yourself and how you feel about yourself. Your thoughts about yourself can change with the situation. For example, you may feel good about yourself when you have completed your work. You may feel bad about yourself when you have left too much work to the last minute.

Self-concept is a lasting feeling and view of one's self. It remains the same in different situations and from childhood to teen years and to adulthood. Self-concept comes from things we can not change—our race, height, childhood experiences, and background.

Parenting and Self-Esteem

Children tend to have positive self-esteem if their parents have high self-esteem, and a negative self-esteem if their parents have low self-esteem. You can probably enhance your child's self-esteem by improving your view of yourself.

The discipline methods a parent uses also make a difference in the child's self-esteem. Abused and neglected children have negative self-esteem. Punishment, shame, and guilt tend to lower self-esteem. Praise, encouragement, and other positive discipline techniques tend to increase self-esteem. Children develop a sense of positive self-worth when their parents set clear rules. Within those rules, the children are free to make their own choices. Their parents teach them to manage the positive and negative natural, logical, and social consequences of their behavior.

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Friends have much to do with self-esteem. Parents can help their children make and keep friends. A best friend can provide positive peer pressure. Having a friend to care about them and to share their family values helps children build self-esteem. The best friend is an important source of strength when your child faces difficulties.

To Improve Your Self-Esteem, Take Good Care of Yourself

Health. Do things that improve your health. Exercise, eat right, reduce your stress, relax, and practice preventive medicine. When you feel better physically, your psychological health improves.

Safety. Wear your seatbelt. Do not drive drunk or ride with people who are drinking. Practice risk management. Show yourself and others that you value yourself. Respect your need for safety.

Peace. Spend time alone doing things you like. Give yourself a break. Take time to pray, to meditate, to enjoy nature, and to be with friends. Many of us are too rushed to feel. Take time to let your thoughts wander. Talk things out. Reflect on your life and experience.

Learn. Read. Take classes. Visit friends. Stay informed. Learn new skills and facts. Invest in yourself. Learn something new. What have you always wanted to learn to do: finish school, learn to swim, fly an airplane?

Things to Avoid

Negative self-talk. Be careful not to say ugly things to yourself. People with low self-esteem often discourage and shame themselves. This practice further lowers their self-esteem. Their negative thinking and fear of failure hold them back.

Jealousy and comparisons. Learn to accept and love yourself and others. Look for special qualities in yourself and others, stop measuring, and stop comparing your worth or achievements with those of others. Stop wishing others would fail.

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Hiding feelings. Do not try to hide your feelings. Fake smiles and cover-ups are dishonest. You have a right to your feelings. Accept them. Share them, pay attention to them and, trust them.

Blaming. Work with what you have. Stop blaming others. Accept your own mistakes. Take credit for your own success. Stop making up excuses for refusing to change.

Background

Relationships and experiences influence self-esteem. Rarely does one event determine our self-esteem. It develops as we accumulate a background of relationships and experiences. Look back on your own life. Think about the important relationships and experiences that influenced your self-concept. What influences your self-esteem today?

Family. Recall experiences with parents, brothers, sisters, and others in your family. Think of both positive and negative experiences. What discipline methods were used in your family? Which behaviors were praised? Who loved you? Who scared you?

School. Remember your classmates, teachers, principals, and counselors. Who were your heroes, enemies? What punishments and rewards come to mind? Was schoolwork hard or easy for you? Did you enjoy sports, clubs, reading?

Work. What were your jobs as a child? How did you feel about your work? How did you select your current occupation and job? Are you pleased? How do you get along with others at work? Are you the boss, the worker, the blamer? Do you blame others for your problems at work?

High Self-Esteem Results in:

- Success
- Better grades
- Better health
- Better relationships better social life
- Success on the job

Low Self-Esteem Leads to:

- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Unhappy relationships
- Teen pregnancy
- School dropouts
- Unemployment
- Depression

Social life. What do you like to do for fun? What were your hobbies as a child? Who were your best friends? Do you still have any of these hobbies and friends today? Whom did you date, hang out with, admire most? Did you make friends with anyone of another race, religion, or culture?

Spiritual life. As a child, did you spend much time alone, with nature, or in prayer and meditation? What were your church experiences? What is religion like for you today?

Physical appearance. As a child, how did you feel about your size and other physical characteristics? How do you feel today? What were your standards and images for good health and appearance as a child? Have they changed?

Goal Setting

Inventory. List your good and bad points. Accept the ones you cannot change. Knowing the truth about your strengths and weaknesses will give you freedom. Look at your past performance and experience.

Change. Look at the things on your list that you can change. Focus on your strengths and how you will improve. Set some easy goals so you will make progress toward changing yourself.

Succeed. Assume a can-do attitude. Set an easy timetable for your progress. We all need to see day-to-day progress. This immediate success is especially important for children. Divide a goal into smaller goals you can achieve quickly. You and your child might need to break down the cleaning of a room into manageable steps: 1) pick up toys, 2) put away clothes, 3) make bed, 4) organize books. Once all of the tasks are done, the room is tidy and can be maintained daily.

Parenting Styles

Children with high self-esteem come from homes with specific qualities of discipline and parenting. The parents totally accept the child. They have clear standards of behavior and academic performance. They are loyal sources of affection and support for the child. They are not indulgent. They do not spoil the child. They are not rejecting. They do not ignore or confuse the children.

The discipline for children with high self-esteem is not harsh. The parents set clear limits. They define, explain, and enforce these limits. Within these limits, the child has great freedom. This means parents do not have to correct all of the child's behaviors. They correct the behavior that goes beyond their clear limits. Punishment is not frequent and not drastic.

Children with high self-esteem come from homes where they learned exactly what their parents expect of them. They know the limits for their behavior and the standards they must meet. Their parent's expectations and limits match the child's age, ability, and interests. The parents respect the child's uniqueness.

Children with low self-esteem experience rejection and disrespect at home. Punishment is frequent and harsh. Standards for behavior and achievement are unclear and change often.

Building Your Child's Self-Esteem

Try to provide activities that build your child's self-esteem. These include:

Talking about expressing and experiencing many feelings. Activities such as storybooks, music, dramatic play, and conversation are helpful.

Letting them see others express feelings appropriately. It helps if the child is close to these people; parents, grandparents, and personal heroes are powerful models.

Providing chances to accept and value uniqueness. Enjoy people of other cultures, religions, life styles. This acceptance is more common in small groups of 5 to 10 children, not large groups.

Making changes. Practicing self-improvement and doing new things give children experience in self-control and goal setting.

Helping children learn to accept what cannot change. These include their abilities, physical features and family situations.

Being sure your child experiences success. Play, music, friends, arts, and active play outdoors provide opportunities for success when school and sports experiences are not successful.

High Self-Esteem	Low Self-Esteem
Active Tries new things Attempts difficult tasks Celebrates accomplishments	Passive Lets things happen Takes no credit for accomplishments
Positive Enjoys others Open about self Gives to others	Negative Has no fun Secretive Lonely
Confident Can-do attitude Concentrates	Nervous Anticipates failure Easily distracted
Flexible Can change Accepts new ideas	Rigid Blames others Bored

In order to help you implement some of the suggestions offered, keep in mind the word **PRAISE** and what each letter stands for:
P—Praise yourself and help others to do the same.
R—Respect children.
A—Accept children.
I—Invest time in children.
S—Set reasonable goals.
E—Evaluate your accomplishments realistically.

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For example, your daughter's friend has brought over his recently completed model spaceship. You might tell the friend what you like about the spaceship. Ask your child to do the same. Both of you could ask the friend how he feels about the project. You can also use such experiences to teach children to be honest and sincere in their praise. Suppose they do not really like what someone else has done. When you are alone with your daughter, explain to her that she should not be dishonest. For example, she might say something honest about the person. "You sure put a lot of work into that." "I'll bet you are learning a lot."

Saying Thank You

Along with praising others, receiving praise is a skill children need to acquire. Again, as with praising others, you play an important role as an example. When someone says something nice about us, we often tell them that they are wrong. We say we are not actually that good. Instead, try thanking them. Say something nice and honest in return. Also, encourage children to say thank you when someone praises them. Help them use the opportunity to praise themselves in front of the other person.

Homework

Pick one of the these suggestions: praising yourself, praising others, teaching your children to praise themselves, or saying thank you and try using it for a week. Also, discuss what you are planning to do with your spouse or partner and encourage them to try it. Children are more likely to learn if significant adults are consistent with each other and in dealing with them.

At the end of the week, measure your progress. If you are doing well, add another step. If you need more practice, keep trying the first step for another week; then look at your progress again.

Summary

Helping children develop a positive self-concept may be the most difficult task of parenting or teaching. There is no easy, fool-proof formula for accomplishing this. It takes a lot of time and effort from concerned adults. You can feel good about yourself for taking the initiative and time to read about self-esteem.

Observing Your Child's Social Development

The child...

1. is usually in a positive mood.
2. is not excessively dependent on adults.
3. usually enters activities or settings willingly.
4. usually deals with disappointment and changes adequately.
5. shows empathy for others.
6. has one or two friends to really care about and wants to be with them.
7. enjoys humor.
8. is not often lonely.

The child usually...

1. approaches others positively.
2. says wishes and preferences clearly and gives reasons for actions and beliefs.
3. states own rights and needs appropriately.
4. is not easily or often the victim.
5. expresses frustration and anger effectively without harming self, others, or property.
6. gets to play and work with others.
7. enters discussions and makes meaningful contributions.
8. takes turns fairly easily.
9. shows interest in others; exchanges and requests information.
10. negotiates and compromises well.
11. does not draw inappropriate attention to self or disrupt the play or work of others.
12. accepts and enjoys people who are different.
13. interacts with smiles, waves, nods, and other gestures as well as words.

The child is...

1. usually accepted rather than neglected or rejected by other children
2. sometimes invited by other children to join them in play, friendship, and work.

Adapted from Katz and McClellan.

Celebrate. As you make progress toward your goals, reward yourself and your child. Take pride in your accomplishments. Enjoy your success. Do not expect perfection. Just keep improving. It is good to set new goals, but first have fun. If you fail, consider what you have learned. Cope with your negative feelings. Then relax, get a positive attitude, and move on.

Some Tough Facts

It is very difficult to change your self-esteem. It takes hard work and honesty. It takes time. Take a hard and careful look at yourself. Change what you can. Accept the rest. If you have trouble making progress, seek help from a counselor and support group.

High self-esteem does not guarantee success. Everybody fails sometimes, even people with high self-esteem. Better self-esteem enables you to handle both failure and success. You will feel better about yourself no matter what the outcome.

Check Your Self-Esteem

Read through each of the following statements. Put a T in the space provided if you believe the statement is true for you. Leave the space blank if it is not true for you.

1. _____ I can admit a mistake.
2. _____ I can talk to people I don't know.
3. _____ I do what I believe is right even if others don't approve.
4. _____ I can accept a compliment and not feel uncomfortable.
5. _____ I can be myself around other people.
6. _____ I can accept myself with all my faults and weaknesses.
7. _____ I can tell you my strengths.
8. _____ I can feel happy for someone else when he or she succeeds.
9. _____ I do not compare myself with others.
10. _____ I have peace of mind.
11. _____ I believe I am unique.
12. _____ I accept differences in others without judging them.
13. _____ I compliment others.
14. _____ I can say "I love you" to all the people I love.
15. _____ I love myself.
16. _____ I am comfortable being alone.

Count the number of statements you marked true. Eleven or more: you have high self-esteem. Six-10: average self-esteem. Five or fewer: low self-esteem. No matter the score on the check list, you can learn to feel better about yourself.

Begin by practicing one behavior on the list. For one week try to make that statement true for you at every opportunity you get. See how you feel when you act that way. Notice how others treat you.

As you work on your self-esteem, you may feel selfish. Remind yourself that you are worth it. Improving your self-esteem will not make you snobbish or arrogant. In fact, as you improve your attitude toward yourself, you will enjoy others more.

The Child's Self-Esteem

Parents, grandparents, teachers, and others who work with children can enhance or depress self-esteem. Consider how children become aware of their appearance, behavior, and feelings. Are they growing up in homes and schools that accept and value diversity? Do they have a healthy sense of what they can do, their strengths and weaknesses, and their likes and dislikes?

Assessing a Child's Self-Esteem

1. Does the child seem to have self-confidence?
2. Does the child complete tasks or become frustrated and quit?
3. Can the child point out specific things liked about self or does the child criticize him- or herself often?
4. Is the child proud or embarrassed by his or her name?
5. Does the child get excited or upset when offered the opportunity to try something new?
6. Does the child set goals that challenge but are attainable or select only easy or very difficult goals?
7. Does the child have dreams and ideas for the future?

Discipline

Self-control is an important part of self-esteem. Parents and teachers guide and discipline children toward self-control. See the "Discipline for Young Children Series," T-2324 through T-2329, especially T-2328, "Encouraging Self-Control."

Some types of discipline enhance self-esteem. Others can seriously harm the child. Self-control enables a child to wait for something pleasant. Handling frustration and stress requires self-control. A child with self control can care for others and develop friendships.

What Children Need

Infants and Toddlers

Parents and caregivers can be a source of positive self-esteem for babies. There are several, specific things adults can do to enhance the self-esteem of infants and toddlers. Look for these behaviors from adults who work in child care programs. Provide these features at home.

1. Respond promptly to the baby's needs and communication.
2. Approach, snuggle, and play with the baby often each day.

3. Watch the child's interest and abilities. Then make it easy for the child to succeed. Move the toy within baby's reach.
4. Call attention to success. Smile. Clap. Cheer.
5. Offer just the right amount of help. Too little help suggests we do not care. Too much says we think little of the child.
6. Encourage language and movement.
7. Pay attention and try to understand what the baby is saying.
8. Paraphrase what the child says or feels: "Sounds like you are sad/angry. It is OK to cry."

It is difficult to provide these things day after day. It is especially hard if the child is unpleasant or ill. If the adult is busy with other things and under stress, positive interactions may seem almost impossible. All parents and child care providers need to take breaks. Caring for children requires help from others and some time off. The child's self-esteem depends in part upon adults who can give much undivided attention, with clear and correct responses to the baby's needs and abilities.

Preschoolers

Parents and teachers of young children can help them develop a positive self-concept in several ways.

1. Accept the child. Try to show your child unconditional love.
2. As long as the child's behavior is socially acceptable, do not try to change it. Your child's behavior will improve through seeing and copying your behavior.
3. When it is necessary to change behavior, make it clear that you like the child but dislike the behavior.
4. Provide many chances for your child to be successful.
5. Help the child understand and accept feelings, both negative as well as positive feelings.
6. Provide a model of self-confidence. Children will be influenced by your attitude.

School-age Children

Self-esteem peaks during the preschool years. It drops when the child enters elementary school and remains low until fifth grade. At preadolescence, there is an improvement in self-esteem but it rarely reaches the high of early childhood.

School forces a new set of standards and role models upon the child. The crowded, competitive school environment is stressful for children. Failure becomes an obvious possibility. Parents can help children evaluate school values in terms of family values. Parents and teachers can help children deal with stress. Reduction of the competition and group size increases the acceptance and success children experience at school. Here are some reasons children's self-esteem declines when they enter school:

Testing. At school children develop self-esteem in new areas, especially grades. They are under pressure to achieve. Testing is a major part of the child's school experience. Through standardized tests, spelling tests, and math tests, children experience failure themselves and they see others fail. They need support to maintain their self-esteem.

Friends. Children, like adults, need friends. They especially benefit from having best friends. At school, friends are separated into different grades, various buildings, ability grouping in classes or by rules against talking to each other. This robs children of an important support and source of self-esteem.

Sports. Schools place great emphasis on competitive sports. Children often equate self-worth with the ability to win. Often sports ability determines popularity.

Looks. At school, children see physical comparisons—height, weight, race, clothing, fads, ethnicity, and attractiveness. Poor children see that they have less than others.

Labels. Children get labels according to their performance. Some of these behaviors are out of their control. "Tardy, works well with others, forgets lunch money, or talks" are marks of conduct appearing on report cards and in records. These evaluations influence what other notice and expect.

Parents can help school-agers deal with these pressures.

1. Love and accept your child.
2. Help your child deal with stress and failure.
3. Work to minimize your child's experience with tests, at least until the third grade.
4. Make sure your child has challenging, successful experiences at home, at church, and in the community.
5. Stress good health practices and grooming, not competitive sports and fads.
6. See that your child has chances to make and to keep good friends.
7. Review your child's school records. Check for inappropriate labels. This is your legal right and parenting responsibility. Be sure teachers respect your child's strengths, interests, family, and culture.

Teenagers

There are four things a parent, teacher, or significant other can do to help teenagers with self-esteem.

1. Love and accept the teen. Help your teenager to love and accept themselves.
2. Use your sense of humor. Appreciate your teen's sense of humor.
3. Guide your teen toward successful experiences.
4. Give the teen a chance to do something for someone less fortunate or less capable.

Teenagers can enhance their own self-esteem. Most of the self-esteem suggestions for adults will work well for teens. Many of the suggestions for teens will work well for adults.

Learning something new does a lot for a person's self-esteem. One study (Gordon, 1990) involved youth at risk who were simply waiting to become 16 to drop out of school. After learning to swim, over half of them learned to read using regular teaching methods. Then they were assigned kind acts to do. They read aloud to kindergartners and folks in nursing homes. They helped younger children with their homework. They stayed in school.

Encourage Children to Praise Themselves

Self-praise frees a person from waiting for compliments from others. Helping your children to praise themselves is a delicate art. It involves helping them to evaluate realistically, gain independence, and make their own judgements.

When you praise children, you may make them dependent on you and your judgments. When children accomplish a task, instead of complimenting them, encourage self-praise. For example, you might say, "I bet you feel good about what you have accomplished." You may ask, "How do you feel about what you did?" Be sure that the children are able to point out specific positive points about their experience or accomplishment.

Encourage children to speak self-praise out loud, even when no one is around. Children may feel self-conscious or afraid others will think they are bragging. Use the bragging and self-praise lists to make up more examples.

Praise Yourself

By praising yourself, you are showing children how to feel good about themselves and that it is all right to self-praise. However, it is not easy. When you do something you feel you did well, you probably say something nice to yourself. It is likely that you say it silently. Teach yourself to say those positive things out loud. This will build your self-esteem. It will also provide a positive model for your children. Tell yourself exactly what you did well and what was good about it. Begin with specific acts; then praise personal qualities. When you praise yourself you make a positive statement about how you feel about what you have done or hope to do.

If self-praise is a new experience for you, start with something simple. When you and your child are coloring together say, "I really feel good about the bright colors I used in my picture." You may feel awkward or self-conscious at first. The more you use self-praise the more natural it will become.

Teach Children to Praise Others

Praise multiplies. Teaching children to praise themselves helps them praise others, and praising others often brings praise in return. Learning how to praise others helps children look for good things in themselves and in others. One way to teach children to praise others is for you to say positive things to your children and others. Children need to practice, however, in order for a behavior to become automatic for them. Watch for opportunities to praise others and ask children to point out something specific they like about what someone has done.

Bragging

Compares behavior to others.
Uses superlatives (best, fastest, most understanding) in comparison to others.
Belittles others or bestows praise on one's self at the expense of others.
Sounds improbable, easy to argue with.
Listener may not take statements seriously.
Easy to be phony.

Examples:

I am the fastest runner on the block.
I make the best chocolate cake, better than anyone I know.

Self-Praise

Compares behavior to own past performance.
Uses comparatives (better, faster, more understanding) in evaluating against one's own past behavior.
Enhances others or supports both self and others.
Sounds believable. Stresses speaker's feelings, therefore, difficult to argue with.
Listener takes statements seriously, shares feelings with speaker.
Requires self-understanding and acknowledgement. Keeps us honest and open to communicate with ourselves.

Examples:

I can run a mile a whole minute faster this year than last year.
I feel very confident about my chocolate cake. It usually turns out moist and light, just as I like it.