

## **SELF ESTEEM – DISCUSSION PAPER**

Self Esteem refers to the image or picture of ourselves that each of us carries around in our heads, basically one's opinion of one's self. This image or picture is constructed through our experiences and is strongly influenced by the messages that others send. The foundations of self-esteem are laid early in life when infants develop attachments with the adults who are responsible for them. The way we interact with our children on a daily basis influences the positive picture that they construct of themselves. Let them know through our language and our behaviour that they are capable and worthwhile and they will begin to believe it. The messages we send to children influences the way they see themselves as well as our relationship with them.

During the 1970's and 1980's the prime child-rearing message was that a healthy self-esteem was central to a child's development. So parents and teachers went to great lengths to make children feel better about themselves. Praise became the main tool in trying to achieve a high level of self-esteem, so children grew used to hearing positive things said about them. "You're terrific!" "That's fantastic!" and other platitudes became *de rigueur* for every well-meaning parent and teacher across the country regardless of the verity of what was said. The trouble is that when praise isn't linked to achievement it becomes meaningless.

In an effort to make children feel good about themselves exposure to experiences of failure were avoided. This approach failed to adequately challenge kids as it did not allow them to consider failure as an option; nor to experience the frustration that comes from grappling to learn a difficult skill. How do children know that they have really succeeded unless they have avoided failing or have overcome challenges? There is no better way to boost your self-esteem than to overcome hardships or succeed in the face of difficulty. Failure and success are natural allies.

As parents, we can encourage children's efforts and praise their persistence but our language is only a tool to help children attain. It is the achievement rather than the words of praise or encouragement themselves that helps children and young people feel good about themselves. Self-esteem is firmly grounded in mastery and competence. Without this as the base then trying to boost a child's self-esteem is like trying to build a house on sand. Words not supported by deeds become, at best, meaningless.

### **How then do our children acquire self-esteem?**

**Possible ways include:**

- (a) by seeing others have confidence in them;**
- (b) by contributing to the needs of others;**
- (c) by overcoming problems;**

Lets look at these in turn.

**(a) *By Seeing Others Have Confidence In Them.***

Self-esteem is most likely to be fostered when children are esteemed by the adults who are important to them. When they treat them respectfully, ask their views and opinions, take their views and opinions seriously, and give them meaningful and realistic feedback. Consider the following:

- Parents are usually the first givers of confidence; for parents the essential question is: What type of self image are you helping your children to create?
- Develop a strong language of encouragement that focuses on effort, improvement and their contribution.
- Display your confidence in their ability to succeed and you will be surprised!
- Look for small victories or achievements and celebrate them.
- Do we give our children realistic responsibility?
- Develop self-help skills from an early age.
- Listening to our children is essential in nurturing their self-esteem.
- Be positive about mistakes and accidents; let them know that they are part of learning. Use them to teach how to fix what went wrong.
- Teach your child look for his own unique gifts and abilities rather than comparing him or herself to others?
- Always give loads of affection.

**(b) *By contributing to the needs of others.***

Self-esteem is also related to children's feelings of belonging to a group and being able to adequately function in their group. Naturally the first 'group' is the family unit; toddlers will develop well if they are given little tasks to do like other members of the family. When toddlers become preschoolers they are expected to control their impulses and adopt the rules of the new community in which they are growing. Successfully adjusting to these groups helps to strengthen feelings of belonging. This in turn strengthens confidence that is a prelude to healthy self-esteem.

Older children are more likely to benefit from tasks and activities that offer a real challenge than from those that are merely frivolous or fun. For example, you can involve your child in chores around the house, such as preparing meals or caring for pets, which stretch his or her abilities and give your child a sense of accomplishment.

- *See Michael Grose's Age Related Task Sheets*

**(c) *By overcoming problems.***

Parents will go to great lengths to do things for kids because it is easier or because they don't want their children to experience frustration or disappointment. But whether kids are learning to tie shoe laces or learning a difficult maths concept at school, by stepping back we provide them with an opportunity to gain mastery and the true sense of self-esteem that comes through accomplishment and overcoming challenge and obstacles.

You can also help your child develop and maintain healthy self-esteem by helping him or her cope with defeats, rather than emphasising constant successes and triumphs. During times of disappointment or crisis, your child's weakened self-esteem can be strengthened when you let the child know that your love and support remain unchanged.

When the problem has passed, you can help your child reflect on what went wrong. The next time a problem occurs your child can use the knowledge gained from managing past difficulties to help cope with a new crisis.

## **Peer Pressure**

As they grow, children become increasingly sensitive to the evaluations of their peers. You and your child's teachers can help your child learn to build healthy relationships with his or her peers.

When children develop stronger ties with their peers in school or around the neighbourhood, they may begin to evaluate themselves differently from the way they were taught at home. You can help your child deal with this uncertainty by being clear about your own values and keeping the lines of communication open about experiences outside the home.

"One person cannot give another self-esteem." The key to self-esteem lies in our active involvement and effective use of "self powers". If my self-esteem is dependent upon others, then it means that my self-esteem is as mercurial as the negative or positive feedback I receive from others, or as the success or failure I realise in the course of the everyday events of my life.

Far preferred is a more stable sense of self-esteem whereby my feelings of self-worth, power, and capabilities are positive and relatively constant in the face of fluctuating life events.

## **Parental Example**

As in most other areas of child development, the child will copy its parents. How do you show your own self-esteem? If we complain and say 'we can't do it' or 'it's too hard' our children will copy this attitude. We may know that tomorrow we will feel better and try again but does our child understand this? Maybe you should tell them that. Additionally you could ask them to help you – a sure-fire self-esteem booster shot.

## **Sense of Humour**

Another tool applicable to the many areas of child development and is extremely helpful in fostering a balanced self-esteem is: a sense of humour! Foster in your child the ability to laugh at themselves and many problems will be avoided. They will do their share of stupid things and have their share of annoying habits and the easiest and fastest way to deal with these is to laugh them off and get on with it.