

Adults Can Help Children Build Self-Esteem

By Jim Slempp

Self-esteem *is the elusive factor that many researchers have identified as critical to young people becoming high or low risk members of society. Success, feeling good, doing well, or the dictionary definition, “having a favorable impression of one’s self, ” might lead us to believe that we only add to our self-esteem when things go well.*

Because we know that higher risk kids are generally ones with low self-esteem, the key question becomes: How do we enhance self-esteem in children? Or maybe the question is: How do children develop their own self-esteem?

Stephen Glenn considers “capable” as the essential piece of self-esteem. “People need to believe they are capable.”

How does one develop this belief? Is it done for them or by them? Could it be that we develop our own self-esteem, our perception of what we are, and what we can do? Could it be that others can’t do that for us?

Oh, we can get feedback from others. Each of us filters that feedback like water through a purifier. What goes in is not what comes out.

It seems to be that much of our sense of capability comes from knowing we can have difficult times and learn or grow from them, or that life has bumps and we have the skills, stamina, courage, and whatever else we need to survive them.

If we believe self-esteem develops in this way, could it be that the pressure adults (teachers and parents) take on to ease the way through life for kids is exactly the opposite of what should be done? Would it be better for children to learn that life is full of mistakes, little failures, disappointments—and that they are capable of dealing with them?

Wouldn’t it be better for children to encounter small difficulties earlier and in small doses when support from adults is both available and accepted, than to wait for larger ones to become life threatening?

Think about the student who is getting perfect grades and has everything going for her and then gets a grade that is not acceptable, or breaks up with a steady friend and decides the world has come to an end. Have we taught children that the only time that they can see themselves as capable is when the world is problem or disappointment free?

As you think about what to do when situations in children’s lives require adults to get involved, you might want to ask yourself two questions:

- Will he believe himself capable as a result of what I do?
- Will she truly be more capable?

If the answer is yes, do it. Children who experience the real world early in their development will develop coping skills and attitudes that support them throughout their lives. Children who see themselves as capable are not the children who make decisions that will be harmful.

One of the most important things that you can do for your child is to work at building his or her self-esteem. Consider these guidelines for helping your child grow in self-valuing:

Acknowledge and try hard to understand your child's world. Kids tend to feel good about themselves when someone else is attending to them. Though they may not be cognitively aware that you are tending to them and that you consider their world valuable, they nevertheless experience your attitude. Listening skills can come into play here. When you can receive a negative message from your child without immediately judging it, you're letting the child know you value her thoughts and feelings.

Compliment and criticize your child's behavior, not the child. This suggestion helps to offset the belief that what children do equals who they are. Your child is not a good person because of his high marks on his report card. He is a good person who happened to get high marks. Sam is not a bad person when he disobeys his parents. He is, in fact, a good person who is disobeying.

Try to detach your child's behavior from the person and then respond to the behavior. The time to address children in their being is when they are doing nothing. Sometimes middle school-age children, when given a positive comment when they are not accustomed to hearing such things, will react negatively or with embarrassment. Don't feel badly if that happens. Simply receive your child's discomfort and reaffirm your love. You might repeat your statement again a week or so later.

Accept the fact that kids are kids. Children tend to fluctuate in their understanding and behavior. Just when we think they are growing up and able to be trusted in making some decisions, they regress and do something that startles us. The more we realize that such behavior is normal, the more accepting of the child we will be, which will also allow the child to accept herself.

Attend to and encourage the process of your child's life rather than content. The content of your child's life consists of the things he does, such as winning a game and making good grades, etc. The process is the personal quality or style the child brings to the content. The process is much more significant than the content. A helpful exercise is to take time to identify qualities in your child that enhance life. The more you focus on them, the more you'll express to your child and the more he will value these qualities and use them as an accurate basis for his own self-esteem.

Teach your children that their experience is valid even if it's different from others' experiences. A most subtle and powerful belief that children sometimes develop is: "If your world and mine differ, one of ours is not valid and must go." If children invalidate their own reality, they will feel inferior, hurt, and overly sensitive. If they invalidate the other person's world, they will feel angry, aggressive, and superior to others. Both responses are signs of low self-esteem. You can best help a child avoid this dilemma by demonstrating tolerance, both in your personal relationship and your relationship with the child. The goal is for the child to understand that if someone differs from her, it doesn't mean that person is attacking her as a person.

Self-esteem is a strong foundation on which to build emotional, social, and physical health in a child. In fact, the way our children think and feel about themselves will inevitably affect every aspect of their lives.

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