

Parents Can Help Children Learn to Like Themselves

by Sylvia W. Lee

Every child needs to like himself, to feel wanted and worthy. The child who likes himself is eager to grow, develop, and enjoy others. A child's attitude toward himself comes from two main sources: what he is able to accomplish by his own efforts and how he is regarded by people important to him—above all, his parents. A young child tends to view himself very much as he believes his parents view him.

Adults might keep in mind the following five suggestions to help children like themselves:

1. Be trustworthy and accept the child's need for dependence on adults. If a child learns during her early years that she can depend on her parents when she really needs them, she will feel cared for, confident, and will more readily reach out to others.

One crucial experience that can affect a young child's feelings about himself occurs when he is expected to stay in an unfamiliar situation without either of his parents or some other trusted person. If adults are willing to support an anxious child through a new experience, it can be a time of growing confidence and mastery.

When first attending preschool, for example, a child is reassured to hear that she has input in her parent's time of departure. This privilege has enabled many a child to relax and begin to enjoy the new experience. Should a parent act annoyed or reluctant to remain, or be overly anxious about his child's ability to adjust, she will feel even more insecure and upset. Telling a child that there's nothing to be afraid of or she's too big to act this way is likely to make her more frightened. Denying her fear does not dispel it; it simply adds shame and disapproval to her feelings.

2. Give the child freedom with limits appropriate to his level of maturity. Although children want their parents to be there when they need them, they also want freedom to satisfy their curiosity about the world around them, and to make some choices on their own. A child does not want others to do for him what he is able to do for himself. Independent learning, however, involves a good bit of trial and error; thus, the freedom that children may rightfully enjoy must have limits prescribed to it.

Sensible limits help a child behave responsibly, which, in turn, fosters self-respect. Adults should make quite clear what they will not permit. A parent who wishes to set reasonable limits might say, "You can tell Joey you're angry and don't want him to use your crayons, but you may not hit him!"

But limits, if they are to serve their purpose, should be suited to the maturity of the individual child. Giving a child more responsibility than she can handle and then punishing her for breaking rules makes the child distrust herself and feel guilty.

3. Respect the child so he will learn to respect himself and others. What parents say and do when a child misbehaves deeply affects his self-concept. Although they may love him dearly,

loving concern is often not the message he gets. Instead, he may feel humiliated, angry, or thoroughly unlovable. Then, because self-hate is extremely painful, he may try to find fault with other persons, to shift the blame and to take out his resentment on those smaller or weaker.

It is possible, however, to discipline a child, and, at the same time, help him maintain his self-respect.

Every child wants to get along well with others. A child who feels likeable doesn't have to overact, show off, or boss other children around to prove herself. Since she is less preoccupied with building self-esteem, she can be more outgoing and natural with others, and when she does need help, she can accept it more readily.

The child who likes himself is quick to discover the satisfactions of practicing mutual respect. He learns how to ask for a turn or favor: "May I swing when you're through?" "Please do the top button for me," or "Will you let me play with your truck?" He can also refuse a request courteously: "You can play with the car later," or "This is my book. I don't want to lend it to anyone now." When a child's rights of possession have been respected, he can understand how others feel and accept their refusals more easily.

4. Encourage the child's efforts to be responsible and self-reliant. A child wants to be helpful and contribute what she can to others because it deepens her feelings of belonging. In nursery school, for example, children can put away toys and equipment, drop paper scraps in the wastebasket, sponge up spills, and wipe off tables. At home, preschoolers can also be helpful, especially if parents are willing to take thoughtful steps to facilitate their children's competence and independence.

Children need convenient places to keep clothes and playthings. Low, open shelves make putting toys away easier and more interesting; they are far more useful than any big toy box with everything jumbled together in confusion. It is also helpful for children to have a drawer or shelf in the family or living room where they may keep certain things in current use such as art materials, books, and games.

Zipper should zip, button holes should have buttons opposite them, and wet-weather boots should slip on and off without an impossible struggle. Low hooks in the child's closet encourage him to hang up his own clothes.

5. Encourage the child's natural creative self-expression. Children need a space at home in which to paint or play with clay and other messy materials, where cleaning up afterward is not a major problem.

Children need both the security of dependence on adults and the satisfaction of self-direction. They need both the love and approval of others and the chance to test and gauge their own abilities. If parents keep in mind the importance of reinforcing their children's self-esteem, they can help them to like themselves and get along well with other people for the rest of their lives.

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Original publication date: 8/27/1989 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon