

Helping Young Children Develop Self-Esteem

Self-esteem or feelings of self-worth are linked to success in life, and play an important role in the development of children's social, physical and academic abilities. Research shows that low self-esteem is associated with increased risk for loneliness, resentment, irritability, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders.

As a parent, you, more than anyone else, can play an important role in promoting your children's self-esteem and helping them feel better about themselves.

What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is a term used in psychology to reflect a person's overall evaluation of his or her own worth. If you have good self-esteem, it means that you like yourself and believe that you are as good as everyone else. If you have poor self-esteem, it means that you believe that you are inferior to others.

Self-esteem encompasses the beliefs and feelings that children have about their competence and worth, including their ability to make a difference in their environment, confront challenges and learn from both their success and failure.

Signs of a healthy self-esteem

Children with good self-esteem have a sense of security, assume responsibility, act independently, take personal pride in accomplishments, tolerate frustration, accept mistakes and failure, have a sense of self-discipline and self-control, handle peer pressure appropriately, attempt new tasks and challenges, handle positive and negative feelings, and offer assistance to others.

How parents can help

The development of a healthy or positive self-esteem is very important to the happiness and success of children. Parental attitudes and behavior heavily affect the devel-

opment of self-esteem in young children. The following tips are helpful for developing healthy self-esteem in your children:

- Praise your children and remember to commend them for their efforts and jobs well done. Help them feel special and appreciated.
- Identify and redirect your children's inaccurate beliefs. Teach them how to think in positive ways, and change their negative thoughts about themselves to positive ones.
- Give constructive criticism, and avoid criticism that takes the form of ridicule or shame. Provide feedback about the child's actions, not the child as a person.
- Teach children to develop problem-solving and decision making skills. Recognize them when they have made good decisions.
- Be a positive role model. Take care of your own self-esteem, and your children will have a great role model.
- Create a safe, loving home environment. Children who do not feel safe or are abused at home will suffer immensely from low self-esteem.
- Show children that you can laugh at yourself. Show them that life doesn't need to be serious all the time. Laughing, good humor and smiling not only lighten the mood but also relieve stress, increase energy and take away thoughts of anger, anxiety or distress.

While it is normal to have ups and downs in life, and children's sense of self-esteem can vary from one situation to the next, constant poor or low self-esteem can be a symptom of a mental health disorder or emotional disturbance requiring medical attention.


Resources

Building Self-esteem a Self-Help Guide online at http://download.ncadi.samhsa.gov/ken/pdf/SMA-3715/SMA-3715_Building_Self_11p.pdf

The Caring for Every Child's Mental Health Campaign: Part of the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services

Program for Children and Their Families of the Federal Center for Mental Health Services. Parents and caregivers who wish to learn more about mental well-being in children may call (800) 789-2647 or visit mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/.

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