



## Self-Esteem in Children

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**S**haryn is bright and expressive and acts in a capable and confident manner. She is willing to accept new challenges and stands up for her rights. She has a positive self-image and high self-esteem. Daniel is quiet, hangs back, and is reluctant to try anything new and different. He seems withdrawn, is sensitive to criticism, and lacks confidence in his abilities. He has a negative image of self and does not think he is very worthwhile.

### **What is self-esteem?**

Self-esteem is a person's understanding of how valuable he or she is in the world. The child has questions like, "Do people like me? Do my parents love me? Do family members care about me? Do teachers respect my ideas? What abilities and traits do I have that are important to others?" Once these questions are answered in a positive way, the child develops trust, security, and a sense of self-worth, which promotes confidence and a feeling of being valued.

### **Why is self-esteem so important?**

Many family scientists consider self-esteem to be the single most important factor in shaping a person's life. Researchers have found that people who have high self-esteem are effective and productive. They know they are lovable and capable and do not have to tear other people down, dominate them, or view them as less important or less useful persons.

### **Where does self-esteem come from?**

#### **Home**

Self-esteem is a family affair. It is in the family that we first decide who we are and how to be that way. Therefore, parents—and other primary caregivers—are powerful examples in the development of high self-esteem in children. The struggle to achieve high self-esteem by children is based on how many condemning or praising voices they carry inside as they grow to adulthood.

Parents usually perceive a child to be competent ("You did that very well") or incompetent ("You can't do anything right"), stupid ("That's really dumb") or smart ("Hey, that's a great idea"), effective ("Thanks, you really are helpful") or helpless ("I knew you would fail again"), worthless ("You're not worth much around here") or valuable ("I love you and am so glad you are my child"). Children's need for parental approval and acceptance is so strong that they will try very hard to do what the parent expects of them.

Negative parental responses will cause the child to develop negative self-image and low self-esteem. These responses include such things as name-calling or labeling ("You are a dumb kid"), a lack of clearly explained guidelines about how the child should act, rejection ("I don't like you"), threats ("If you don't stop being mean, I will spank you"), overgeneralizations ("You never do what I tell you"), disinterest ("Don't bother me, I'm watching TV"), silence after a child's question, and violent punishment.

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### **School**

Preschool, kindergarten, and grade school experiences also play a crucial role in developing a sense of competence in the child. If children are intellectually able and feel competent at age 7, they tend to develop relatively high self-esteem by age 12. The old adage “success breeds success” really works. Furthermore, children feel better about themselves when their school offers a variety of ways for them to succeed (with arts, dramatics, and sports programs, for example, in addition to regular classes), and when their teachers make a point of praising each child for what he or she does well.

Children’s self-esteem may also be affected by the structure of the classroom and the school, depending on whether it emphasizes competition and comparison or cooperation and diversity. Whether the school attempts to respect cultural differences or promotes the idea that there is only one correct way to think and act, it can have a profound effect on a child’s self-esteem.

### **Friends**

During middle childhood, friends and peer group have an ever-increasing influence on the child’s self-esteem. Acceptance in one’s group, and confidence of one’s best friend, can go a long way toward building a sense of competence. As children grow older, they are less likely to turn to their parents and more likely to turn to their peers, partly because their parents are unavailable and partly because they consider their peers more capable of providing help than their parents are.

### **Ways to help children develop high self-esteem**

The development of high self-esteem is one of the greatest gifts we can give to our children. What can parents do to ensure its healthy development? Here are some suggestions.

- Establish a strong bond of love and trust at an early age.
- Learn about normal childhood behaviors, so you will have a better understanding and realistic expectations of your child’s capabilities at different ages.
- Provide an affectionate, nurturing, and safe emotional and physical environment for your child.
- Set limits on acceptable behavior through teaching and role-modeling. When you discipline or punish

your child, always do so in private, because humiliation before others can deeply damage a person’s self-esteem. The most effective method for developing desirable behavior is praising good behavior, not punishing bad behavior.

- Be available to listen. Help your child acknowledge feelings (anger, sorrow, anxiety, fear). If your child says “I hate him” in response to having a toy broken, you may wish to respond, “You don’t hate your brother, you love him.” But your child is feeling hatred at that moment, and you are denying his or her feelings. You are saying, “Your feelings are wrong, they don’t count.” It is better to encourage a child to express those feelings (“You are angry because your toy is broken”), while teaching him not to act in a hurtful or destructive manner.
- Praise, encourage, and thank your child, even for the smallest steps of improvement. Make sure that affirmations and “positive discipline” outweigh the punitive or “negative discipline.” Avoid harsh criticisms and putdowns.
- Listen with interest and full attention when your child talks. Give a few moments of undivided attention each day.
- Realistically evaluate your child’s good points and strengths, and help your child to see them. Avoid comparisons with other children, especially brothers and sisters.

### **Assessing a child’s self-concept**

Be alert and observing of children’s attitudes and behaviors. Think about the following questions when you observe your children or others’.

#### **Positive**

- Do they seem to be self-confident and self-assured?
- Are they able to complete tasks, once started?
- Do they know their strong points and what they like about themselves?
- Do they get excited when offered the opportunity to try new things?
- Do they set goals that challenge their ability without being impossible to achieve?
- Do they have dreams and ideas for what they would like to be when they “grow up”?

**Negative**

- Are they easily frustrated and often quit tasks before they are completed?
- Do they get upset when given the opportunity to try new things because they are afraid of failing and being embarrassed?
- Do they set goals that are far below their ability or are far too difficult to achieve?
- Do they have trouble saying positive things about themselves; do they criticize themselves often?

If you answered “yes” to most of the questions on the positive side, then these children probably have an over-

all positive self-concept. If you answered “yes” to most of the questions on the negative side, then you may want to consider ways you can help these children develop a more positive view of themselves.

Remember that positive self-esteem is important, because when people experience it, they feel good and look good. They become effective and productive and respond to other people and themselves in healthy, positive, growing ways. People who have positive self-esteem know that they are lovable and capable, and they care about themselves and other people. As someone vitally interested in your child’s development, you need to take heed of the saying, “If it is to be, it’s up to me.”

### Thirty-two ways for parents to say “You are okay”

I think you are a neat kid.  
 It’s good to see you.  
 I’m glad you are my daughter (son).  
 I’m glad you live in our house.  
 You are important to me.  
 I enjoy being with you.  
 I’m glad you are my friend.  
 I’m glad to share this time with you.  
 Thank you for ....  
 I like the way you did that.  
 I’m amazed at your improvement.  
 You’re a super son (daughter).  
 I appreciate your helping.  
 I’m proud of the way you did that.  
 Wow, your work is impressive.  
 Thanks for picking things up.

I love you.  
 Good morning.  
 I like you.  
 I enjoy you.  
 You are unique.  
 I like to hug you.  
 You are a pleasure.  
 Thanks for being you.  
 Neat work.  
 Nice job.  
 Keep up the good work.  
 Terrific.  
 Excellent results.  
 Congratulations.  
 Nice going.  
 Super.