

How to raise your child's self-esteem

Parents have a role to play in helping their children tackle life's problems with confidence

BY RHONDA RABOW, POSTMEDIA NEWS JANUARY 21, 2011



High self-esteem develops when a child feels he belongs. He has a sense of feeling important, accepted and valued. When the child grows up feeling lovable and capable, he develops high self-esteem.

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How many parents don't care about their child's ability to succeed and excel in life? Very few, I think. Isn't it our goal as parents to bring up our children with the values, beliefs and self-esteem they need to enable them to meet life's challenges successfully and with confidence? Yet how many parents worry that their child may not have the necessary skills to accomplish these goals?

In my work as a psychotherapist, many parents come to me at a crisis point. They worry their child has low self-esteem and lacks confidence. They tell me their child has no friends at school, is often bullied and lacks motivation and ambition. They are stressed that their child also seems to lack the social skills to interact well with others and they worry how their child will manage life as an adult. They are doing the best they can, but feel something needs to be fixed so that their child will have higher self-esteem.

The good news is that parents can improve a child's self-esteem. It is never too late to encourage and empower your child!

High self-esteem develops when a child feels he belongs. He has a sense of feeling important, accepted and valued. When the child grows up feeling lovable and capable, he develops high self-esteem. If he is proud of his accomplishments, he assumes responsibility and is accountable for his actions. He is able to tolerate frustration, have the courage to try new things, sees obstacles as challenges and has compassion and empathy for others.

Parents need to be able to role model these qualities as well. While none of us is perfect, parents are the primary influencer of how their child sees the world and himself.

You are unlikely to find a child with high self-esteem coming from parents who are critical, angry or impatient. This kind of environment tends to produce children with anxiety, insecurity and self-doubt. When you have parents who have not learned the skills to deal with their own frustration, disappointment and impatience, don't be surprised to find a child who is lacking these same skills.

To have high self-esteem, the child needs to feel it is safe to make mistakes and not feel demeaned or unworthy. This is not to say that the parent should not set limits or give consequences for unacceptable or negative behaviours. That is, after all, a parent's responsibility. It is, however, the manner in which these messages are passed on that dictates whether the child feels corrected or rejected.

Most parents do not want to hurt their child, but few have the communication skills to be able to "parent" without being influenced by their own feelings of lack, frustration or disappointment. These tones and attitudes are what the child hears and translates to mean that he has failed, and this message can have a more devastating effect on the child's self-esteem than whatever problems were being addressed.

Each child needs to find his place in the family and in the world. He needs to feel that he is unique and special in some way. He needs to find hobbies, develop skills or interests that make him feel proud and accomplished. Parents can encourage this uniqueness by helping the child to explore interests, talents or hobbies.

Tips to building your child's self-esteem

1. Encourage your child to do his best without expecting perfection. We all make mistakes; children need to feel that it is safe to make mistakes without feeling they have disappointed their parents. Expectations need to be reasonable based on the child's age and experience.
 2. Be consistent. Define limits and rules clearly. Don't make promises you can't keep or suggest consequences that you can't or won't follow through with. If your child can't trust your word, he will lose respect for you and stop trusting you.
 3. Become aware of what you say and how you say it. Discuss problems without placing blame. Children remember what you say about yourself and others and they may in turn repeat the same negatives and criticisms to themselves about themselves. It is much more difficult for a child to maintain a healthy self-esteem if he feels his parents don't value and respect themselves.
 4. Be the example you want to set. Don't tell your son to stop insulting or bullying his sister if your partner is doing the same to you.
 5. Show your children affection and tell them you love them. One of the things children have asked for when questioned about what they are missing from their parents is to be told they are loved. You may believe that you child knows this from all the things you buy him, or places you take him, but your child needs to hear it as well.
 6. Give your child responsibility. He needs to know that he is an important part of the family and as such has certain responsibilities. It will make your child feel more invested in the family if there are expectations and accountability.
 7. Ask your child about his or her interests. Encourage him to acquire hobbies. Ask him about his day. How is school? How are the teachers treating you? Do you have someone to eat lunch with? These questions will help you to find how your child really is doing at school.
- Don't assume he will tell you if he is unhappy or someone has hurt his feelings. Most children don't share these feelings. They think their parents won't be able to help them anyway.
8. Don't compare one sibling with another. Each child is different and has his own unique personality. It's okay to expect certain behaviours and rules to be respected, but comparing one child to another only breeds resentment and discouragement. It does not inspire.
 9. Treat your child with respect. Listen attentively, give him eye contact and don't interrupt him when he is talking. If you want him to treat you and others with respect, model the same behaviours.
 10. Give each child some alone time with you. It can be just 15 or 20 minutes, but playing a game, or reading a story or just listening to him or her talk about what interests them will be valued by your child and help him or her to feel special, worthy and important. Isn't that how we all want our children to feel?

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