

Building Positive Self Esteem

Children form a self concept or picture of themselves largely from the messages they get from others. Because parents and family are usually the most important people in the child's life, their messages are particularly powerful. The picture of self that forms in the early years will change throughout life, but the initial picture is crucial because it lays the foundation for relationships and attitudes toward learning, which in turn influences later development and learning.

Self esteem is evaluation or assessment of self. A positive picture of oneself translates into high self esteem, a negative one into low self esteem. While we want children to develop a realistic picture of self, one that isn't inflated, we also want them to be confident and to know that they are valued.

Healthy self esteem includes appropriate humility. It does not require a child to be competitive, to validate him- or herself at the expense of others. It includes being able to value others too, not needing to find someone to feel better than.

Self esteem builds from birth. When you hold and talk gently to a baby, smile and show delight in the baby's presence, you are contributing to the picture the child builds as someone who is valued, who brings pleasure to others. Over the preschool years, as the child develops more and more complex ways of engaging with others and the world, experience and messages from others feed the child's picture of self. As a child feels valued, part of a family a community, a cultural group, self esteem grows as the child comes to know him or herself in relation to others.

Parents can help children develop positive self esteem by taking particular notice of what they are good at. Every child has strengths and talents, and when we not only value them but let the child know that we value them we contribute to the child's positive self esteem. It helps to look beyond obvious strengths and talents to value and identify other less obvious ones such as empathy, sensitivity to others' feelings, resilience, perseverance, or sense of humour, to name a few. .

Providing a rich environment with many opportunities to try things, meet challenges, find success, help others and teach as well as learn is a foundation for contributing to children's self esteem. Though, most importantly, it is the interactions with others that contribute most. Ensuring that children's achievements are noted, that their value is affirmed continually, that their failures are not devastating, that they are given opportunities to share their talents and strengths with others as well as to learn from others contribute to healthy self esteem. Avoid comparing children with other children and in doing so you will give the child the message that his or her uniqueness is valued.

Self esteem is of course not static, but it is also more fundamental and basic to the person than simply an evaluation of what you've done at the time. This means that people with healthy self esteem can take reasonable risks, withstand failure, and survive disappointments. They know the difference between who they are and what they do. This means that the traditional advice to "criticise the behaviour, not the child" is important. That is, the child him - or herself isn't "good" or "bad/naughty" when they have done something we either approve or disapprove of. What they have done may be hurtful, annoying, damaging or destructive, but the message to them should always separate what they have done from who they are. That is, "good" children will sometimes do not-so-good things.

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