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Self-Esteem

A Handout for Parents

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Background

Our knowledge about ourselves often includes ideas such as "artistic", "athletic", "creative", and/or "tall." These ideas make up our self-concept "Who I am." An important component of self-concept is self-esteem, which represents how we feel about or value ourselves.

Self-esteem is important because poor self esteem has been associated with depression, suicide, low academic achievement, susceptibility to peer pressure and delinquency. Although causal links between self-esteem and these problems are difficult to establish, many educators believe that self-esteem appears to be a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for successful life adjustment.

The Development of Self-Esteem

Beginning at age 8, children not only have a global sense of self-esteem, they also evaluate their competencies in five areas: 1) scholastic competence; 2) athletic competence; 3) social acceptance; 4) physical appearance; and 5) behavioral conduct.

In some instances, children are able to discount the importance of areas in which they feel less competent. For example, a child can indicate a low evaluation of his/her competence in athletic ability but it will not negatively affect self-esteem because the child has discounted his/her performance in this area ("sports are not very important to me"). Therefore, low self-esteem is a result of a *discrepancy* between the importance of an area and one's perception of competence in that area. A child who sees scholastic achievement as important will have low self-esteem if he/she is doing poorly in reading or math.

Research has also documented the importance of positive regard from significant others, primarily parents, peers and teachers, as a critical determinant of self-esteem. Positive regard can be unconditional; a child feels loved and accepted regardless of his/her ability or behaviors. However, positive regard from others is conditional when a child feels loved and accepted only when he/she meets the high standards of others.

Conditional positive regard is devastating to self-esteem.

Characteristics of Children with Low Self-Esteem

The following behaviors may be indicative of low self-esteem:

- A reluctance to learn new things or an avoidance of challenge. Children with low self-esteem may ask parents for help or refuse to do things by themselves.
- Frequent negative self-statements ("I can't;" "I'm not good at anything").
- Excessive criticism of others and/or possibly downplaying the achievements of siblings or peers.
- Reactivity and dependence on external cues. Children with low self-esteem may be highly sensitive to verbal and nonverbal cues as they search for feedback on their performance. They may react strongly to some cues, such as a frown or sigh from parents. This is despite being assured that the negative cue was unrelated to their performance.
- Overreaction to mild anxiety-provoking stimuli such as time constraints, healthy competition, or constructive criticism.
- Easily influenced by peers.
- Very reactive to the ups and downs of daily life. Failure can be devastating, even on minor projects.

Suggestions for Parents

1. Take a good look at your parenting style. Parents who are warm, accepting, concerned and affectionate often have children with high self-esteem.
2. Create a harmonious home through clear and fair rules, consistent and fair discipline. Allow opportunities to discuss disagreements within the family.
3. Allow your child some choice and control in daily activities within prescribed limits. Picking out clothing for school, choosing one meal a week, or selecting the book to be read at bedtime may communicate to a child that his/her opinions are trusted and valued.
4. Be familiar with your child's strengths and weaknesses as well as his/her present level of ability. Make reasonable demands for performance based on improvement by your child rather than comparisons with peers, siblings or developmental milestones. Discourage your child from making these same comparisons.
5. Establish "family time" on at least a weekly basis. Decide on a time where the television is turned off, the phone goes unanswered and the family spends quality time with each other. Allow each child to choose the activity on a regular basis.

6. Let your children know that you have confidence that they can do things on their own. Refer to past struggles and point out how they were able to overcome them ("Remember when you had trouble making your bed you stuck with it and now it is easy for you.").
7. Assign your children manageable age-appropriate household chores. Expect them to complete them everyday with minimal reminders. Use specific task feedback and reward close approximations.
8. Be sure to encourage and support your children. Do not make love and support conditional on a child's efforts or behaviors. Make sure that your children know that you may be displeased or disappointed in a behavior but that they can always depend on your love.
9. Model good social problem solving skills. Stress using words to express feelings and discussion as a way to solve family problems. Help your children identify their feelings through reflective listening ("you look disappointed about not winning the game.").
10. Encourage children to develop a wide range of skills and hobbies that they can feel successful at. Remember that self-esteem is developed through evaluations of ability in several areas, not just academic achievement.

Resources for Parents

Clemes, H. & Bean, R. (1990). *How to raise teenagers' self-esteem*. New York: Price, Stern, Sloan.

Fuller, C. (1994). *365 ways to build your child's self-esteem*. Colorado Springs, CO: Piñon Press.

Loomans, D. & Loomans, J. (1994). *Full esteem ahead: 100 ways to build self-esteem in children and adults*. Tiburon, CA: J. Kramer, Inc.

Martin, M. & Waltman-Greenwood, C. (1995). *Solve your child's school-related problems*. New York: Harper Perennial.

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