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Steps to Building Your Child's Self-Esteem

Family Focus

Michigan State University

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STEPS TO BUILDING YOUR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM

At one time or another, most parents ask themselves, "What can I do to help my child feel better about him/herself. . . to feel more confident. . . to view life positively?"

The answer, of course, is not a simple one. It does merit our serious concern, however, since it is widely recognized that the presence of these characteristics in children and adults is critical to their happiness and well being in life.

Let's look at some ways to build a feeling of positive self-worth or self-esteem in our children.

Look at Each Child as a Unique Person

Every effort must be made to view, respond and value each child on the basis of his/her own personal criteria—not in comparison to brothers, sisters or classmates. When a child feels that he or she is accepted and valued for the unique qualities that he/she possesses, his/her sense of well being grows.

Problems in this area frequently arise because parents, often unconsciously, fall into the trap of viewing a child in terms of their own traits, needs, talents and shortcomings. As a

result, the focus is often on what a child does not have rather than on his/her countless assets.

Give Each Child Some Undivided Attention

Taking time to focus full and undivided attention on your child is a quality that conveys love by saying, "I care. I have time for you." It means taking some time to be completely absorbed with your child.

Be assured that constant, intense involvement is neither necessary nor realistic. What is important is to let your child know that he/she can count on some kind of attention at regular intervals.

It may be necessary during especially busy periods to set up a definite time for these get-togethers. Special times of stress, such as during a family move, when a new baby arrives or upon entering school, often require additional periods of time with a child.

Be Positive and Honest with Your Child

Whenever possible, comment honestly and positively about what your child has done. Remember to mention when he or she has

done a good job. If you feel that you can't comment honestly, perhaps you can encourage with a general statement such as, "You've worked hard today. I appreciate it!" Keep in mind, too, that positive responses are conveyed not only by words, but also by actions. The value of a warm smile, a hug, a kiss or a pat on the back should not be discounted.

Avoid Being a Judge

How you respond to your child and his/her behavior and how you express your feelings about your child are critical factors in building up or tearing down self image. Parents who learn to react to a situation without being judgmental in the process encourage positive self-esteem.

Stop for a moment and consider how you normally respond to your child's behavior. If your statements frequently begin with "you" it is likely that they include both a reaction to his/her behavior plus a judgment of him/her. If they begin with "I" you most likely are directing your response to his/her behavior only. Put yourself in your child's shoes. How would you feel after hearing each of these statements?

Situation	"You" Judgment	"I" Reaction
Your child's school evaluation indicates achievement below his/her ability.	"You're lazy!"	"I'm worried about your grades. Let's talk about what you think the problems may be."
A car almost hits your 7-year old child playing in the street.	"You dope! Don't you know any better than to play in the street?"	"I'm so angry. I've repeatedly told you about the danger of playing in the street. I'm scared you will be hurt."
Your child wins an art contest.	"You're such a good child."	"I'm so proud of the drawings you entered in the contest because they show how carefully you have been observing nature."

Encourage Independence

A child builds self-confidence when he or she is permitted to participate in making decisions or to make choices and decisions. Take special care, however, to provide choices and opportunities for decisions that are appropriate for the child involved. For example, allowing a young child to determine his or her own bedtime may not be best because the child has little concept of his or her physical needs. On the other hand, asking a child to make choices about what clothing he or she wants to wear may be quite reasonable.

Make Your Expectations Realistic

When you base expectations for a child on his or her age, particular personality and the current circumstances, the child can more easily experience success and enjoy a feeling of accomplishment. Repeated successes make a child feel more valuable. Consequently, success builds a child's self-esteem.

References and recommended readings

Briggs, Dorothy Corkille. *Your Child's Self-esteem*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975.

Satir, Virginia. *Peoplemaking*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1972.



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