

Your Role in Your Children's Self-Esteem

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It's an old and excellent adage that effective parents give children roots to grow and wings to fly. Every child needs the security of a firm base and the self-confidence to leave it one day.

A central part of this process is helping children to develop self-esteem. Self-esteem is the confidence that we are competent to deal with the basic challenges of life -- and also the feeling that we are worthy of happiness.

Having self-esteem entails trust in one's own mind. It also means that we have confidence in our own value--in our right to be treated with respect and benevolence, and moreover, in our right to personal happiness and joy.

THE VALUE OF SELF-ESTEEM

There is practical importance in developing self-esteem in your children when they are young. As we grow and develop, we continually face challenges of one kind or another. A child or adult who believes in his/her own personal resources is far better situated to live life successfully than a child who is inhibited or paralyzed by self-doubt and self-distrust.

The person who has no confidence in his own ability all too often allows someone else to run his life. It is rare that anything positive comes from that.

Second Consideration: Children who have a clear sense of their own value tend to treat other people well. And they expect that others are going to deal with them in the same way. They don't tolerate mistreatment--so that when they perceive someone is mistreating them, they withdraw and find a relationship in which they will be treated better.

TREAT YOUR CHILD WITH RESPECT

Children do not grow up in a vacuum. They grow up in a social setting, surrounded by other people. Most of their early learning occurs through encounters with their parents, grandparents, siblings and others who come into the family circle.

The most important factor to consider when giving your child the basis for a happy adult life is to treat him with courtesy, respect and benevolence from the very beginning, so that the child comes to expect and perceive these qualities as normal.

The child will come to understand this respectful behavior as the best way to communicate with other people. Then when your child encounters abusive behavior, he will see it as undesirable and unacceptable.

Often a child has a sense of being loved by his parents-but not of being respected. Children become frustrated when they're not taken seriously by adults

I remember one of my clients saying "My father talks with more courtesy and respect to everyone else than he talks to me. And yet, I know he would die for me. It's very confusing."

Strategy: When your children are talking, look at them and listen while they are speaking. Don't cut them off or finish sentences for them. Don't unnecessarily correct them or do other work when they are talking to you. They can sense our impatience or lack of interest.

Example: One day, I was swinging my granddaughter around by the arms. This was something she loved. But at some point, she said, "Let me down, Grandpa." But because I was having so much fun myself, I continued to swing her. She said, "Grandpa, you're not listening." And I immediately realized that I wasn't and set her back down on the floor.

By listening to what my granddaughter said, I treated her feelings with respect. A child who is not allowed to have a voice in what happens to him will not feel entitled to his own views as an adult.

THE FIRST LANGUAGE IS TOUCH

Long before a child can understand words, he understands touch. Declarations of love without touch are unconvincing and hollow. Hugging and kissing your child and holding his hand are very basic and important ways of expressing love, comfort, support and nurturing.

Through touch we send sensory stimulation that helps the child's brain develop.

Children need to experience that their person is loved and valued.

INSPIRE, RATHER THAN DEMAND

I say inspire because you can't give children self-esteem. Self-esteem is always generated from within.

How do you inspire self-esteem in a child? Obviously, if you treat a child with love, respect and acceptance, then you create the context in which the best chance exists that the child is going to internalize your messages and generate a powerful sense of self from within.

Parents also should remember that it is important to respect the child's need to struggle in the learning process.

At one point or another, the parent may want to step in and tell the child the answer or show him how to solve the problem. But the fact that the child is wrestling with the learning process doesn't mean that anything is wrong.

All learning involves some struggle. Part of the feeling of achievement that comes from learning is the sense of having tackled a problem and subdued it-of having won by virtue of your own efforts.

The parent may be motivated by good intentions in trying to solve the problem for the child, but the parent is really aborting the child's learning process. Children need to know the extent of their own abilities-that they can overcome problems in the world, even if it takes a certain amount of effort.

ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD'S CURIOSITY

It is important to support your child's curiosity. Take his probing questions seriously and with respect, instead of dismissing them as silly or trivial. Children live in a world that is completely new to them. They must learn everything from the ground up, from the beginning. Their questions are part of an orientation process that goes on for years and that shapes their views of the world.

Solution: One of the most important things you can do to nurture a child's curiosity is teach how to think-not what to think.

One of the responsibilities of parents or teachers is to prepare a child for independent survival as an adult. That preparation isn't just an issue of reading, writing and arithmetic or manners. Most fundamentally, success in adult life depends on the ability to think and to learn.