

Boost your teen's self-esteem

Roots to grow and wings to fly

For parents of students in middle and secondary school

What is self-esteem?

To esteem something is to value it. If we value ourselves, we feel we are ready for life and its requirements. Self-esteem includes confidence in our ability to overcome obstacles and manage challenges, and in our right to be successful and happy.

"To trust one's mind and know that one is worthy of happiness is the essence of self-esteem. Self-esteem doesn't just allow us to feel better, but to live better," says Nathaniel Braden, author of *Six Pillars of Self-esteem*.

Why do we need it?

Self-esteem is essential to normal and healthy development. A child who grows up in a family where he or she is respected, valued, supported and held to reasonable limits and expectations has an enormous developmental advantage over a child who does not.

Where do we get it?

Children with high self-esteem usually live in an environment with the following five conditions:

- total acceptance of thoughts, feelings and "value of person"
- clearly defined, reasonable and enforced limits
- freedom from humiliation or violence
- challenged, but with respect
- behaviours and expectations consistently modelled by parents

How do we keep our self-esteem?

- Parents must be visible. The strongest message you can give about your child's self worth is your interest in being with her.
- Respond to your child in a way that makes sense to him. Say what you mean and mean what you say. For example, if your child says, "I didn't get the part in the play," you say, "That must hurt."

- Use "appreciative" praise rather than "reflective" praise. Appreciative praise creates self reliance, self-esteem and self control. For example, "You played your position well," rather than "You're the best." Or, "Your enthusiasm made this more fun" rather than "You go girl!" Reflective praise is positive but vague, and is based on *your* standards, not your child's.
- Communicate esteem-building concepts both verbally and non-verbally. Nurturing and appreciation are communicated powerfully through touch. A hug, pat on the head or shoulder, affectionate rubbing of the hair, placing an arm around the child, smiling, a light kiss, giving a thumbs up sign, a wink — all help to build a child's self-esteem.

How do we lose self-esteem?

Children are meant to grow up with self-esteem. What prevents children from developing self-esteem includes lack of parental self-esteem, lack of parenting skill, lack of involvement, and lack of understanding.

Children can lose self-esteem when parents:

- humiliate and assassinate a child's character by calling her *bad*. This will undermine her self-esteem. Make your criticism specific to the behaviour and your feelings. Say, "I'm very sad to see you tease your sister so cruelly," rather than "you're a bad girl to tease your sister."
- praise globally, indiscriminately and extravagantly. This overwhelms a child and makes him anxious and dependent on approval.
- encourage their child to deny and disown her own feelings and emotions in order to meet the parent's emotional needs
- subject a child to the trauma of abuse and neglect
- forget to respect their child's self-esteem when they are angry

This tip sheet was prepared by Penny Smith, School Social Worker.

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