

YOUNG FAMILY PROGRAMS

family focus

II. STEPS TO BUILDING YOUR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM

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At one time or another most parents ask themselves: "What can I do to help my child feel better about himself...to feel more confident...to view life positively?" The answer, of course, is not a simple one. It does, however, merit our serious concern 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 of the important techniques that can be employed to build a feeling of self worth or high self-esteem in our children.

✓ First, Check Your Own Feelings Of Self Worth

Experience has shown that parents must feel secure and good about themselves before it is possible to help their children reach this same goal. Parents with high self-esteem are most successful in creating a home atmosphere where communication techniques and family routines help children to feel loved and important for their own special talents and qualities.

✓ 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 being with your child both physically and mentally. It means taking some time to be completely absorbed with your child. Be assured that constant, intense involvement is neither necessary nor realistic. The important thing is to let your child know that he can count on some of this 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 occur during family moves, when a new baby arrives or upon entering school often require additional periods of full involvement with a child.

✓ Look at Your Child as a Unique Person

Every effort must be made to view, respond to and value each child on the basis of his own personal criteria...not in comparison to brothers, sisters or classmates. When a child feels that he is accepted and valued for the unique qualities which he possesses his 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 countless assets.

✓ Be Positive and Honest With Your Child

Whenever possible comment honestly and positively about what your child has done. Remember to tell him when he 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 by actions as well. The value of a warm smile or a pat on the back should not be discounted.



Avoid Being a Judge

How we respond to our child and his behavior and how we express our feelings about them are critical factors in building up or tearing down his 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 behavior plus a judgment of him. If they begin with "I" you most likely are directing your response to his 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 your expectations.	"You're lazy!"	"I'm worried about your grades."
A car almost hits your child in the street.	"You dope! Don't you know any better than to play in the street?"	"I'm so frustrated I can't stand it! I've repeatedly told you about the danger of playing in the street. I'm scared stiff you will be hurt."
Your child wins an art contest.	"You're such a good boy."	"I'm so proud of the drawings you entered in the contest because they show how carefully you have been observing nature."



Encourage Independence

Children build self-confidence when they are permitted to participate in or make choices and decisions. Special care should be taken, however, to provide choices and opportunities for decisions which are appropriate for the children involved. For example, allowing a young child to determine his own bedtime may not be in his best interest because he has little concept of his physical needs. On the other hand, asking him to make choices about the clothing he wears for play may be quite realistic.



Be realistic in Your Expectations

When expectations for a child are based on his age, his particular personality and the current circumstances in which he is operating, he can more easily experience success and enjoy a feeling of accomplishment. Repeated successes make a child feel more valuable and consequently build his self-esteem.

References and Recommended Readings (available in paperback editions)

- Briggs, Dorothy Corkille, Your Child's Self-Esteem, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970.
- Elkind, David, A Sympathetic Understanding of the Child: Birth to Sixteen, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1971.
- Satir, Virginia, Peoplemaking, Palo Alto, California: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1972.