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Dear Parents of Young Children – A Young Child Looks At Himself?

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Dear Parents of young children

A Young Child Looks At Himself

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

"WHAT SORT OF A FELLOW am I anyway?" Is a three-year-old likely to ask himself this question? "Certainly not," you will say. But a child is constantly building a picture of himself as a person, which is likely to affect his attitudes about people and about life in general.

Some children frequently shy away from new situations while others go out to meet life and seem entirely unafraid. To some extent we can say, "Little children are like this." But this is not the whole story.

Where does the social world of a little child begin? It begins with the picture he has of himself. Experiences with people and things help to influence this picture. Certain kinds of experiences help a child create a satisfying picture of himself.

Trusts Himself

If Jimmy can learn to trust himself he will more easily come to trust others and to gain confidence in new situations. One way to do this is to be sure that he has his share of love and that he has a very special place in his family. So much has been said today about the need of little children to be loved that we may begin to think of love as something to be taken regularly like a dose of medicine. The way love is bestowed is not nearly so important as the feeling which the child gains in the process. Does Jimmy know he is loved? We can say to Jimmy who may be the third boy in the family "I'm so glad you are my little boy." To Mary, we may say, "How nice that your hair is straight. It's so easy to comb!"

If a child feels that he is loved for what he is and just the way he is, he

will come to feel that he is a person of worth because his parents think so. He begins to develop trust in himself as a person in his own right.

This, of course, is one reason why it is important to avoid discussing him with others when he is present. Even though we use sign language or big words that we think he will not understand, he will probably know that he is being talked about. This may raise some doubts in his mind about himself.

We may give Jimmy some anxious moments about his future with the remark, "If you don't clean up your plate, you'll never be a football player." This may also make him feel that even his best efforts do not please his parents. This is not to say that one such incident will discourage a child, but in the long run we want a child to gain the feeling that "I am doing all right; they like me the way I am."

Tests His Powers

As soon as little children begin to walk and get about they are continually testing their powers with things and with people. Everything is new and is something to be tried out, not just looked at.

Jackie, at two, discovers the light switch and is intent on turning it on and off. Little wonder that this fascinates her. When she touches the switch, it moves; it may even make a noise and at the same time the room lights up. Jackie is testing out her powers with the light switch, and as her mother enters the picture she is also testing out her powers with people.

It is one thing for Jackie to be able to share this wonderful discovery with her mother at the age of two. It is quite another thing to let her flip the light switch up and down and use it as a play thing as she grows older. Eventually Jackie must learn to leave the light switch alone. She may learn

this easily or it may take some time. If it requires punishment, at least we can confine our efforts to the light switch. We do not have to add that, "Jackie is a bad girl who will never learn to leave things alone." This last can be thought of as a "double dose" for children and is not likely to help them gain confidence in themselves.



Sometimes children need a little help to succeed in what they are trying to do. Recently I watched little Tommy struggling to free his wagon which had become tangled around the leg of a chair. It was plain that Tommy needed help, for his patience would soon be exhausted. However, it is not always necessary to step in and help children to protect them from small failures. Sometimes helping and sometimes withholding help will both tend to build confidence and at the same time give a child the feeling that, "It is all right to try."

Seeks Support

A child's picture of himself will be greatly enhanced through the appreciation, comfort, and support he receives in times of need. Children may

be silently asking for support in their moments of eagerness, discomfort, disappointment or fear.



With what eagerness does Susan present a bouquet of dandelions or Billy display the angieworm he has just found! It's hard for a parent always to stop and admire, but it's also possible to take a look on the run, giving as much time to the children as we give to interruptions by adults. A child has greater respect for himself if others respond to him and respect him.

"Davy hit me on my arm," says Ricky as he comes in with tears streaming down his face. His arm hurts and he hurts in other ways, too. He is afraid to strike back and defend himself. What kind of comfort does Ricky need? If he lacks the courage to hit back, urging him to do so may destroy his self-confidence rather than add to it. Likewise shaming, scolding or teasing will not help. Teaching a child to stand up by his own rights is more a matter of helping him gain confidence in all of his relationships. Of course we do have to step in when one child hurts another. On the other hand, if we show approval when an overly aggressive child strikes back, he may get the idea that fighting is the only or the best way to settle an argument. We can strive for a balance between being too severe with the aggressive child and expecting too much self-defense from the timid child.

Needs Support

In a similar way the fears of children can be greatly reduced by the kind of support which we give them. Giving children time to warm up to strangers, exploring with them when they say, "There's a big black bear in there," explaining to them in their language just when you will return, will make them less anxious.

If we could become a little more sensitive to those times when a child needs our support, we could more often influence the picture which the child has of himself.

A nursery school teacher, who sees many children in the course of a day, emphasizes the need of little children occasionally to behave in a "grown-up" way.

She observed one little boy in whom the change in how he felt about himself was quite noticeable. Timmy's father brought him to Nursery School every morning and it was his custom to remove Timmy's coat, hat, leggings, boots, etc., before leaving him. One morning Timmy's father was late and had to leave without performing this service for him.

At first Timmy said he couldn't take his things off by himself. The teacher assured him that he could and that he might try. This was not easy for Timmy and it took about 45 minutes. But once he had accomplished it, his whole view of himself seemed to change, and he began to take a greater delight in his surroundings.

Nursery school teachers observe countless situations in which the mastering of a physical skill affects children in their social relations. Mary Jean came to school and announced that she had learned to stand on her head. She immediately wanted to demonstrate her skill to the other children. They watched wide-eyed and for the

moment at least, Mary Jean was tops in their eyes.

In another situation, Martha became very pleased with herself when, after her teachers had worked with her, she had poured juice for all the children "My mama doesn't know I can pour juice," she exclaimed with obvious satisfaction.

Children who can master a physical skill or who feel they are behaving in a "grown-up" way, at least part of the time, are more apt to view themselves in a favorable light. They will have their moments of doubt in themselves, it is true, but if we can help them to trust themselves, if we can share in their moments of eagerness and give them support in times of need, it will make their moments of uncertainty more bearable.

This letter suggests that:

The way a child views the world and the people in it will be colored by the way a child views himself.

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Sometimes children enjoy most the simple toys that you can hurriedly put together out of scraps or waste materials on hand.

Collect match boxes, large or small, to make a whole roomful of doll furniture. You yourself can experiment in order to interest the children. You might begin by making a doll's bed that rocks. Cut out two pieces of cardboard that resemble a headboard and footboard. Curve the bottom of each piece and glue to each end of the open box. Place a tiny "doll" inside, cut blankets and a pillow out of colored pieces of paper.

Glue several boxes together for a chest of drawers.

Let the children figure out how to make other things such as arranging two boxes together, cutting away one end for a chair or upending one box with a circular piece for the tabletop.

What can you say when Mary proudly shows you her creation and it looks like nothing you ever saw before? You can say, "Tell me about it." In this way you may get a clue and you will help Mary to expand her ideas by giving her something to talk about.