

The Southwoods Way and Self-esteem

One of the core things we can all agree on as parents is that helping a child to develop positive self-esteem is very important. It is one of the corner stones to a mentally healthy life. Positive self-esteem allows children to be brave and reach out to try new things. Without knowing it, a positive feeling of self-worth allows children to fail without being failures. A parent, who through actions, shows a child that no matter what he does he is loved, helps their child develop a positive sense of belonging. And it is that belief that they belong, that what they say and do matters, empowers children to have self-respect.

We have modified ten ways to build self-esteem that we found in on line at the parent center.

Give unconditional love. A child's self-esteem flourishes with the kind of no-strings-attached devotion that says, "I love you, no matter who you are or what you do." Your child benefits the most when you accept her for who she is regardless of her strengths, difficulties, temperament, or abilities. So lavish her with love. Give her plenty of cuddles and kisses. And don't forget to tell her how much you love her. When you do have to correct your child, make it clear that it's her *behavior* — not her — that's unacceptable. Instead of saying, "You're a naughty girl! Why can't you be good?" say, "Pushing Olivia isn't nice. It can hurt. Please don't push."

Pay attention. Carve out time to give your child your undivided attention. That does wonders for your child's self-worth because it sends the message that you think he's important and valuable. It doesn't have to take a lot of time; it just means taking a moment to stop flicking through the mail if he's trying to talk with you or turning off the TV long enough to answer a question. Make eye contact, so it's clear that you're really listening to what he's saying. When you're strapped for time, let your child know it without ignoring his needs. Say, "Tell me all about the picture you drew, and then when you're finished, I'll need to finish my work."

Teach limits. Establish a few reasonable rules. For instance, if you tell your child she has to eat in the kitchen, don't let her wander around the family room or sit at the computer eating the next day. Knowing that certain family rules are set in stone will help her feel more secure. It may take constant repetition on your part, but she'll start to live by your expectations soon enough. Just be clear and consistent and show her that you trust her and expect her to do the right thing.

Offer choices. A good rule of thumb: Let your child choose between possibilities that make you comfortable. He'll gain confidence with each opportunity to make a decision. Letting him know that you have faith in his judgment increases your child's sense of self-worth.

Support healthy risks. Encourage your child to explore something new, such as trying a different food, including a new best pal in weekend plans, or going on a camp trip. Though there's always the possibility of failure, without risk there's little opportunity for success. So let your child experiment safely, and resist the urge to intervene. For instance, try not to "rescue" her if she's showing mild frustration at figuring out how to navigate or decide on which extra curricular activity she will participate. Jumping in to outline the options without being asked can foster dependence and diminish your child's confidence. You'll build her self-esteem by balancing your need to protect her with her need to tackle new tasks.

Let mistakes happen. The flip side, of course, of having choices and taking risks is that sometimes your child is bound to make mistakes. These are valuable lessons for your child's confidence. When you goof up yourself, admit it, says Daniel Meier, assistant professor of elementary education at San Francisco State University. Acknowledging and recovering from your mistakes sends a powerful message to your child — it makes it easier for your child to accept his own shortcomings.

Make success a snap. Set clear non-negotiable boundaries and then allow her to make decisions within them. By giving her structure and the resources to take care of her own needs, you'll help foster independence and pride in her ability to do things for herself.

Celebrate the positive. It's sometimes too easy to tally up all the things a child does wrong, but everyone responds well to encouragement, so make an effort to acknowledge the good things your child does every day within his earshot. For instance, tell his dad, "Mike took out the trash this morning." He'll bask in the glow of your praise and his dad's heartening response. And be specific. Instead of saying "Good job," say, "Thank you for waiting so patiently in line at the store for me." This will enhance his sense of accomplishment and self-worth and let him know exactly what he did right.

Listen well. If your child needs to talk, stop and listen to what she has to say. She needs to know that her thoughts, feelings, desires, and opinions matter. Help her get comfortable with her emotions by labeling them. Say, "I know you're sad because camp is over." By accepting her emotions without judgment, you validate her feelings and show that you value what she has to say. If you share your own feelings ("I'm excited about going to the play with you"), she'll gain confidence in expressing her own.

Provide encouragement. Every child needs the kind of support from her loved ones that signals, "I believe in you. I see you trying. Keep going!" Encouragement means acknowledging progress — not just rewarding achievement. It means thanking your child for cleaning her room, even if she missed some under her bed. It means smiling in support as she struggles to complete a task, in spite of it not being the exact way you would have completed it.

There's a difference between praise and encouragement. One rewards the task while the other rewards the person ("You did it!" rather than "I'm proud of you!"). Praise can make a child feel that she's only "good" if she does something perfectly. Encouragement, on the other hand, acknowledges the effort. "Tell me about your game. I see that you scored" is more helpful than saying, "Your team won that is great." Too much praise can sap self-esteem because it can create pressure to perform and set up a continual need for approval from others. So dole out the praise judiciously and offer encouragement liberally; it will help your child grow up to feel good about herself.