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Self-Esteem in Children

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It seems that *low self-esteem* is the number-one answer given as a root cause to most given problems that an adult may face. Bookstores are filled with guides, manuals, and how-to books focused on the subject. Now there are many books and articles centered on low self-esteem in children. Recently, several parents have approached me and asked questions about improving their child's self esteem. In this article and the one that follows, I have listed some very practical information that will assist parents, teachers, and counselors in helping children to build up their self-esteem and allow them to have a solid foundation for a strong character. Through some of the following suggestions, you may find appropriate ways to assist a child to grow up with positive self-esteem.

What is self-esteem?

Each person is specially created and uniquely loved by God. There is only one of us in the world, and we are all very special. Children are not born feeling good or bad about themselves. They learn this from what happens to them. Self-esteem is the pride that a person has in himself or herself. A person with high self-esteem feels worthwhile (good and capable). People with low self-esteem think they are not worthwhile and that what they do is not important to others or to themselves.

How we feel and think about ourselves and how children feel and think about themselves can affect our behavior and can change each day. It is important to listen to children and assess how they feel each day, and where these feelings might be coming from. Who are the important people in the lives your children? It is important to listen for clues that will tell you the kinds of relationships your children have with these people. Listen to them when they are involved in pretend play, games, arguments, or are just talking with other people. People who are important to children have a great influence upon the development of self-esteem in children.

What Can You Do to Help Build Self-Esteem

Praise each child's success (even very small ones). Praise each child who tries hard.

- Give sincere affection. Let children know that they are loved and wanted.
- Show interest in each child's activities, projects, or problems.
- Tell children what to do instead of what not to do. This prepares them for what to do.
- Let children know that mistakes are a natural part of growing up. Everyone (including adults) makes mistakes.
- Try to ignore temper tantrums and other negative behavior as much as possible.
- Show appreciation when children cooperate, help you, say kind things to other children, obey the rules, and do other positive things.
- Remember that learning new skills takes time and practice. Children do not learn new skills all at once.
- Respond affectionately when children behave well. Tell children what you like about their behavior.
- Let children know that you believe in them and expect them to do well.
- Provide activities that offer success to your daycare children.
- When a child misbehaves, separate the misbehavior from the child. For example, say "I don't like it when you throw toys, but I still like you. I know you will do better tomorrow." Let the child know you believe in him or her.

Actions that May Lower Children's Self-Esteem

Try to avoid the following actions because they may lower children's self-esteem. This can be very harmful.

- Expecting too much or too little from children.
- Yelling at or criticizing children, especially in front of other people.
- Criticizing children more often than praising or showing appreciation.
- Calling children clumsy, thoughtless, stupid, lazy, etc.
- Telling children who have made mistakes that they are failures.
- Overprotecting or neglecting children.¹

¹ Taken from the National Network for Child Care - NNCC. Nuttall, P. (1991). "Self-esteem and children." (Family Day Care Facts series). Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts

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