

DEVELOPING SELF-ESTEEM

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*A discussion of how self-esteem develops "normally,"
how it suffers when learning disabilities are present,
and what steps can be taken to improve it*

The child with learning disabilities faces new challenges each day, and the outcome of each challenge affects the child's beliefs about himself. Parents are often concerned about the self-esteem of the child with learning disabilities. They want their children to grow into healthy, happy, self-directed individuals. Self-esteem may be the most important component of this.

The purpose of this article is to describe how self-esteem develops "normally," how it suffers when learning disabilities are present, and what parents can do to contribute to a child's self-esteem. A second, underlying purpose is to alert teachers to the significant role self-esteem plays in children with learning disabilities. Many of the activities recommended for parents can easily be translated into classroom activities. In addition, teachers may want to make copies of the article available to their students' parents. (Requests for reprints should be sent to the author whose address appears at the end of this article.)

What is self-esteem?

A child's feelings about himself make up his self-esteem. High self-esteem means being satisfied with who you are, liking yourself, and respecting yourself for meeting your own standards and as a human being (Rosenberg 1985). Psychologists talk about self-esteem as something related but slightly different from self-concept. A person's self-concept is made up of the ideas he has about himself, an assessment of his skills and traits, whereas self-esteem is how much he feels he is worth. Two children may each think that they are attractive but not good in school. One child may think it is most important to look good while the other child may think that doing well in school is most important.

These two children may have very different degrees of self-esteem, because they differ in the values and attitudes they hold on school achievement and personal appearance.

There are a number of components to self-esteem. We must feel that (1) we are capable; (2) we are significant in that we matter to others; (3) we are powerful and have some say in what we do; and (4) we are unique and worthwhile in our own right (Coopersmith 1967; Schilling 1986). A child must develop in each of these ways in order to have a good feeling about himself.

How does self-esteem develop?

Children begin to form a sense of themselves from the time they are born. These early experiences are especially important because it appears that "at some time preceding middle childhood the individual arrives at a general appraisal of his worth, which remains relatively stable and enduring over a period of several years" (Coopersmith 1967). The individual's self-esteem will fluctuate with certain events, and he will have higher esteem for some aspects of himself than for others. But the child's general attitude toward himself is much more resistant to change after this early period.

Stanley Coopersmith (1967) summarized three conditions associated with the development of self-esteem:

. . . total or nearly total acceptance of the children
by their parents, clearly defined and enforced limits,
and the respect and latitude for individual action

that exist within the defined limits. In effect, we can conclude that the parents of children with high self-esteem are concerned and attentive toward their children, that they structure the worlds of their children along the lines they believe to be proper and appropriate, and that they permit relatively great freedom within the structures they have established.

The relationship between parent and child lays the foundation for self-regard. In their early interactions, the baby learns that he can signal and engage his parent, and the parent replies with love and comfort. This helps the infant gain a sense of confidence and worth (Givclber 1983). As the parent responds to the infant's movements and expressions and shows admiration for the child, the infant learns that he is a good person who is worth loving. As the child learns to walk, talk, and play, he looks to the parent for recognition and praise. The constant attention reassures him that he is important and capable. When he asserts his own wishes, he learns the limits of what is permitted and that he has the power to make many choices within those limits.

The young child is always expanding concepts of what he is and what he'd like to be. He takes in what key people say about him and begins to respond toward himself in a manner consistent with others' attitudes toward him. The value young children assign to themselves is a reflection of how they believe others value them.

As the child masters new skills, he begins to determine what specific areas of the self are valued. The young child delights in learning new things. He will begin to recognize that there are some areas in which he excels and some in which he is deficient. His overall regard for himself will depend on the relative value attached to these areas of the self.

As the child grows older, he is more likely to filter what is said in a way that confirms his existing self-image. Nancy Cotton (1983) has explained that as the child goes through middle childhood, the impact of praise greatly depends on whether the child values the praising person and the area of self being praised. If the praise comes from someone important to him, it is more likely to be meaningful. If the praise is aimed at an area that the child thinks is important, it will also

have a greater impact than praise for things that are not important to the child.

The young child defines himself by concrete abilities, achievements, and physical characteristics. The child is particularly vulnerable when defects in this "social exterior" occur (Cotton 1983). Success at school is particularly important. Erik Erickson (1959) characterized the school years by "I am what I learn." The child's specific and general self-images continue to develop as he discovers his own strengths and weaknesses according to these external standards.

However, as the child enters adolescence, he is capable of more abstract thought, which leads to introspection. He is more likely now to be concerned with internal aspects of himself like loyalty or anger. In general, early adolescence appears to be the time when the child's self-esteem is at its lowest as he comes to recognize his own imperfections. In general, younger adolescents have poorer self-concepts than older adolescents, with 12-13 years of age being the low point of self-esteem (Rosenberg 1985).

Children who mature earlier seem to develop more favorable attitudes about themselves than late maturers. Any differences between boys and girls are most visible at adolescence. Girls appear to have slightly lower self-esteem than boys during adolescence (Rosenberg 1985).

Also beginning in adolescence, the individual's sense of worth is generally regulated from within himself. That is, he is less vulnerable to others' opinions and begins to rely more on his own opinion. Even the healthiest adults will need some reassurance of worth from others at times, however. One's level of self-esteem will shift up and down throughout life, depending on how he thinks he measures up to his own standards (Brennan 1985).

How does a learning disability affect self-esteem?

Children with learning disabilities seem to be at risk for having low self-esteem. We don't yet know how widespread the problem is (Kistner et al. 1987), but we do know that it is a serious concern to parents. In addition, low self-esteem appears to extend into adulthood and is often associated with employment problems (Hoffman et al. 1987; Schmitt 1986).

The learning disability's potential effect on a child's self-esteem has been described by many parents and the professionals who work with these children (Burka 1983; Kronick 1981; Osman 1982; Ungerleider 1985). Unrecognized disabilities may even affect the early interactions between mother and infant. The infant may not be able to localize and respond to its mother's voice (Jacobs 1983), or to attend to the early games parents play with their babies. As they fail or struggle to learn new skills, many children with learning disabilities are insecure in their abilities and overall feelings of self-worth. Some children with learning disabilities may feel "dumb" and suffer ridicule and defeat because of school failure, athletic ineptitude, or inability to pick up on social cues. Often they believe they cannot perform quite well enough to meet their parents' and teachers' expectations. When they fail to master even the most basic skills, their confidence in themselves is greatly lowered.

What Parents Can Do

Helping Children Feel More Capable

- Allow the child to take on special projects for you, even if the other children might do them better or if it would be easier for you to do them yourself.
- Help your child make improvements in just one or two areas at a time. Avoid pointing out mistakes in other things he does, so he doesn't feel that everything he does is wrong.
- Display works of art, school papers, scouting honors, certificates of swimming achievement, and so forth on the refrigerator or some chosen showcase.
- Ask him to teach a skill to someone else, like a younger brother or sister.
- Assign him well-defined, simple daily chores to do. See Weiss and Weiss (1976) for help in teaching by task analysis.
- Help him to find his own abilities and allow him time to pursue them (White 1985). If he's a good swimmer, don't neglect swimming because he's too busy with tutors.

Helping Children Feel More Significant

- Learn to listen to your child. Without pressuring, encourage him to talk about his feelings and thoughts. Let him know that his ideas or concerns carry weight.
- Help your child find a group to feel a part of. Participation in student government, scouting programs, school clubs, computer-user groups, and clubs can foster a sense of belonging (Chervin 1986).
- Have your child volunteer time to help an elderly neighbor, at a hospital, day-care center, therapeutic horseback riding or swimming class.
- Don't forget to tell your child that you love him. Sometimes parents get out of the habit and it becomes awkward. Children with learning disabilities may have a special need to have it said.
- When he experiences a success (like making a new friend or learning to drive) celebrate to show him that his life events matter to the whole family.
- Involve the whole family in different family outings based on what individual persons would like to do, e.g., visit a doll museum for one child, go to garage sales for another, and play basketball for another.

Helping Children Feel More Powerful

- Help the child with a good sense of humor recognize the power he has to change people's mood with humor.
- Teach the child to make decisions. Start by giving two choices and gradually increase his responsibility for recognizing and choosing between alternatives (The Future Planning Project 1987).
- Have the child help set the dinner menu, select what will be in the lunches he takes to school, and order his own food at restaurants.
- Have the child make a schedule for himself with your help in determining average homework time, bedtime, etc. Allow him to determine the order.
- Let the child buy his own clothes, choose the color, or pick between two styles.

- Help the child recognize self-defeating behaviors like fear of failure and lack of motivation (Omizo & Omizo 1986). You may want to find a counseling group to help.
- Be aware of natural parent tendencies to hold your child back for his own protection. Take a look at the decisions you make for your child and carefully assess the risks of having the child make those decisions for himself.

Helping Children Feel More Worthy

- Recognize and point out the inner qualities that the child has that make him special—his sensitivity to animals, his ability to have fun, his regard for others' feelings, his playfulness, desire to understand things, ability to make others laugh, or his creativity.
- Promote hobbies, such as collections, photography, gardening, crafts, or music (San Diego City Schools 1983).
- Demonstrate respect for all people. Discuss the uniqueness of each person and point out that all have qualities to be admired.
- Help the child meet positive role models in college students or adults with learning disabilities (San Diego City Schools 1983).
- Discuss the child's problems openly with him. Emphasize the positive and let him know that trouble in school does not mean he will not do well in life (Sternberg, date unknown).

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