

RAISING SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is how we feel about ourselves, and our behaviour clearly reflects those feelings. A child or teenager with high self-esteem will be able to:

- act independently
- assume responsibility
- take pride in his/her accomplishments
- tolerate frustration
- attempt new tasks and challenges
- handle positive and negative emotions
- handle anger appropriately

On the other hand, a child or teenager with low self-esteem will:

- avoid trying new things
- feel unloved and unwanted
- blame others for his/her own shortcomings
- feel, or pretend to feel, emotionally indifferent
- act out with huge rage and fear in difficult situations
- be unable to tolerate a normal level of frustration
- put down his/her own talents and abilities
- be easily influenced

Parents, more than anyone else, can promote their child's self-esteem. Here are some ways of building self-esteem:

- When you feel good about your child, tell them. Parents are often quick to express negative feelings to children but often forget to show positive feelings. A child doesn't know when you are feeling good about him/her and he needs to hear you tell him/her that you like having them in the family. Children remember positive statements if they are said often enough and are genuine. They use them as part of their armour against the world. Practice giving your child genuine words of encouragement at least once each day.
- Be generous with praise and let your child know when they are doing something well. Get into the habit of looking for situations in which your child is behaving really well or displaying a talent. When your child completes a task you could say, "You made a really good job of tidying your room" or " You did really well to keep your cool today when it must have been difficult"
- Teach your child to practice making positive self-statements. Self-talk is very important as what we think determines how we feel and how we feel determines how we behave, so it is important to teach children to be positive about how they "talk to themselves." An example of positive self talk is: "I handled that really well" or " I'm getting better at Maths because I worked hard this term" or even "Wow, my sister got the better of me and I didn't hit her"

- Avoid criticism that takes the form of ridicule or shame. Sometimes it is necessary to criticise a child's actions but when the criticism is directed to the child as a person it can easily deteriorate into ridicule or shame. It is important to learn to use "I statements" rather than "You statements" when giving criticism. For instance say, "I would like you to keep your room a bit tidier as it will make you feel better as well as me" rather than saying "Why are you always so lazy? Don't be so useless" Make it the BEHAVIOUR that you don't like, not the CHILD!
- Teach your child about decision-making and to recognise when he/she has made a good decision. Children make decisions all the time but often are not aware that they are doing so. There are a number of ways parents can help children improve their ability to consciously make good decisions which will in turn allow the child to feel good about themselves and will reinforce and raise their self-esteem rather than lower it.
- Brainstorm! Parents can make an important contribution by pointing out or suggesting alternatives if the child has none. Allow the child to choose one of the solutions only after fully considering the consequences. The best solution will be one that solves the problem and simultaneously makes the child feel good about him/herself. Afterwards, consider together the outcome of using that particular solution. Did it work out well? Or did it fail? If so, why? This will help the child to make a better decision next time or feel good about themselves and using the solution which worked out well.

Ways to help children develop a positive self-image:

- Teach children to rephrase the way they ask for things, ie instead of: "I want" or "Get me/give me.....", try to get them to change it to "I would like..." or "Would it be OK if I....." Encourage them to ask for what they want assertively rather than aggressively, pointing out that there is no guarantee that they will get it but it is more likely if they ask in the right way. Be friendly and try not to imply that they are being useless if they can't do something ie if they feel intimidated asking for something in a shop, help them to practice by going with them the first time – try not to force them to do something they feel unsure of in public – it's better to teach them how to do it or support them so that they feel confident enough to do it themselves.
- All children and teenagers need to accept responsibility for their behaviour. Let them know that they are responsible for their behaviour and not you or anyone else. Likewise, they are not responsible for others' behaviour. Avoid blaming children for how you feel. To help children learn self-discipline, the parent needs to teach and support rather than punish and criticise.
- Encourage your children to develop hobbies and interests which give them pleasure and which they can pursue independently.

- Help your children develop a tolerance of being teased. Teasing in school and between peer groups is inevitable and self-confidence will help your child to deal with it. Help them learn to cope with teasing by ignoring it while using positive self-talk such as "names can never hurt me" and "I have to deal with this in a different way because if I react to it, it will never stop whereas if I laugh it off, it will stop" The same can apply to bullying as long as it isn't severe.
- Help children learn to focus on their strengths by pointing out to them all the things they can do rather than things that they can't.
- Encourage your children to behave toward others the way they'd like their friends and family to behave toward them. For example, if they can't bear being criticised, it's likely that they will use criticism to others as a tool to wound. Are you, the parent, using criticism against them? Are they using it toward you?
- Laugh with your children and encourage them to laugh at themselves in a gentle and kind way. Compassion and empathy are important qualities that your child needs to develop and use towards others as well as expecting that others will be compassionate and caring towards them.
- Finally, be friendly and warm and loving towards them even when they are behaving badly. That's not to say you must tolerate bad behaviour but rather make sure that the behaviour is modified by raising self-esteem, not by lowering it and they are offered alternatives for dealing with frustration and anger