

Developing Healthy Self-Esteem in Your Child

By: Sara Dimerman, C.Psych.Assoc.

When Chloe, my twelve year old daughter was about four, she stood in front of her full length mirror admiring her reflection. When she saw me standing in the doorway, she smiled and said, "I love myself." My heart was filled to overflowing as I heard her expression of self love and I thought about how great it would be to stay little forever.

As we age, it's often difficult to maintain those loving feelings. I'm thinking about my twenty year old who when she was seventeen, was more inclined to focus on the pimples on her face and her gangly limbs as she struggled through typical egocentric adolescent angst about what others might think of the way she looked.

Now, at twenty, Talia understands society's pre occupation with how we look on the outside but also realizes the importance of loving her inner beauty.

Healthy self esteem is when we look at the people around us but don't think of ourselves as any better or worse than anyone else. It's also about loving yourself from the inside out. The kind of love that allows for age spots, acne and other imperfections. The kind of love that allows you to shine and says that you are proud of who you are.

If you believe that it is important for your child to love him or herself from the inside out, then you may be interested in the tips below:

Love Yourself

How do you show that you love yourself?

What do your children hear and see when you're standing in front of your mirror? Do they hear you say "I'm so fat. I look terrible in this dress" or do they hear you say "I like the color of my shirt against my skin."

On other occasions, do they hear you say, "I'm so clumsy. I'm always spilling things" or do they hear you say "oops, I'll get a rag to clean this up." Keep in mind that your children are listening and watching even when you think they aren't.

Separate the Deed from the Doer

As clichéd and obvious as this may sound, it is very important to remember that even when your child behaves badly, he or she is not "bad." In fact, even when he or she behaves well, try not to say that he or she is a "good" boy or girl. When you are happy or proud or when you are angry or disappointed, comment on the behavior that has made you feel this way. So, instead of saying "You weren't a good girl for mommy today," say, "when you don't share with your brother, I feel disappointed."

Choose your words carefully

Even with the best of intentions, there are times when parents use demeaning words or label their children in a way they regret later. I am thinking of comments such as “don’t be an idiot,” “you’re so selfish,” “don’t be a loser,” and one of the more common, “you’re so lazy.” Even though we may slip up from time to time, it is our responsibility not to demean or use words that will make our children feel put down. It is our responsibility as parents not to call our children names. Not only do put downs damage a child’s self esteem but may also become part of a self fulfilling prophecy. In other words, if a child feels that his or her parents believe that he or she is lazy, no matter what he or she does, then that child may not think that there is any point in trying to prove his or her parents wrong. Instead, try to find opportunities to comment on what you do like. By doing this, you will encourage more positive behavior.

Sit with your children while they watch television

Watching any program with your child is important but in relation to this topic, especially when they are watching popular programs that perpetuate society’s infatuation with Botox and better bodies. Ever watched *Toddlers and Tiaras*? It’s a real eye opener. By watching with them, you can comment and ask questions that will help them to evaluate what they are watching and how they are being influenced. I don’t believe in forbidding or censoring most programs as this may encourage even greater curiosity and may lead to them watching behind your back.

Help your children find their passion

When children are very young and before they have piles of homework to contend with, expose them to different activities so that they can see which they are most interested in. Then, as they grow older, help them to cultivate their passion. Try to balance competitive extra curricular activities with those that encourage personal best.

Display their work and certificates of achievement

Most parents have huge piles of their children’s artwork and certificates of achievement in a corner of a table or tucked away. Years can go by before they are sorted. Trying to keep on top of the pile can be challenging but important if you are going to display current work. This is a great way to help your child feel proud of his or her accomplishments and to feel encouraged to do more of the same.

Don’t hold your children back from “showing off” a little

Some parents may be concerned about having their children labeled as obnoxious or a “show off” when displaying their talents. I agree that one needs to be sensitive and gauge just how interested others are in watching your child perform. However, whenever

possible, encourage your child to “show off” in moderation. Don’t force your child to be front and centre if he or she is inhibited but if not, then applaud his or her desire to shine and help to create opportunities for this.

Give compliments freely

Some parents may be concerned that their children’s heads will swell and that they will be impossible to live with if they are told how wonderful they are all the time. Of course I am not suggesting that you go overboard. I’m just suggesting that when you see something that you like, instead of thinking the thought in your head only, say it out loud. So, for example, if your ten year old comes downstairs in the morning and has dressed herself well, say something like “I love how you mix and match clothing. I wish I had the fashion sense that you do.”

Get your child involved in helping others

Helping others makes us feel good inside. That feeling usually translates into feeling proud of oneself. Expose your children to opportunities to volunteer with people who are less fortunate.

Make family their foundation

If a child feels that his or her family is working together as a team, that people care about one another, treat each other respectfully and help each other out with responsibilities, then that child is more likely to feel a sense of security and belonging. He or she will feel an overall sense of well being, loving others and will be more likely to feel good about him or herself.

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