



Building Self-Esteem in Children and Teens

A positive sense of self is one of the greatest gifts you can give a child.

- Children with high self-esteem:
 - Feel accepted, loved and competent
 - Feel confident that they can do what is expected of them
 - Think good things about themselves
 - Feel prepared for everyday challenges and develop into happy, productive people

- Children with low self-esteem:
 - Feel self-critical and are hard on themselves
 - Feel insecure or not as good as other kids
 - Focus on times they fail rather than the times they succeed
 - Lack confidence
 - Doubt their ability to do well at things

Why Self-Esteem Matters

- When children feel good about themselves, it sets them up for success — in everything from school to friendships. Positive feelings like self-acceptance or self-confidence help kids try new challenges, cope with mistakes, and try again. Taking pride in their abilities and accomplishments helps kids do their best.

- By contrast, kids with low self-esteem might feel unsure of themselves. If they think others won't accept them, they may not participate as often. They may allow themselves to be treated poorly and have a hard time standing up for themselves. Kids who don't expect to do well may avoid challenges, give up easily, or be unable to bounce back from mistakes.

Having low self-esteem can block success. It can leave kids distracted by the stress of how to deal with everyday challenges.

How Self-Esteem Develops

- Contrary to what some might think, self-esteem does not come just by telling kids they're wonderful, special, and great (even though they are!).
- Self-esteem is the result of experiences that help a child feel capable, effective, and accepted.
 - When kids learn to do things for themselves and feel proud of what they can do, they feel capable.
 - Children feel effective when they see that good things come from efforts like trying hard, getting close to a goal, or making progress.
 - When kids feel accepted and understood by a caregiver or someone close, they are likely to accept themselves, too. Their good feelings about themselves multiply as caregivers praise good behaviors, help when needed, and give encouragement and support.

Self-esteem develops over time. And if it's low, it can be raised.

Helping Children Develop Self-Esteem

- Help children learn to do new things. At every age, there are new things for kids to learn. Show and help them first, then let them do what they can, even if they make mistakes. Be sure the child has many opportunities to learn, try, and feel proud – it increases their feelings of competency and confidence, and builds their problem solving skills.
- Give children choices. To build confidence in the world, kids have to take chances, make choices and take responsibility for them. Giving choices – within a reasonable set of options offered by you – makes them feel empowered. Choices may be simple when young, but they will prepare the child for more difficult choices as they get older.
- Let children know that no one is perfect. And explain that no one expects the child to be. The way you react to the child's mistakes and disappointments impact how the child will react.
- Offer sincere praise.
 - Praise the child often, but be specific in your compliments. For example, instead of reacting to their drawing with "You're the best artist in the world," try

something like “I really like how you drew the whole group. You even included details like Priya’s curly hair.”

- Children will see through insincere praise, so avoid it. For example, telling a child they played a great game when they know they didn’t feel fake. It’s better to say, “I know that wasn’t your best game, but we all have bad days. I’m proud of you for not giving up.”
- Praise effort. Offer most of your praise for effort, progress, and attitude. For example, “You’re working really hard on that project,” or “You’re getting better and better at reading,” or “I’m really proud of you for having such a great attitude.” This kind of praise encourages kids to put effort into things and to work toward goals, and they are more likely to succeed.

- Ban harsh criticism. The messages kids hear about themselves from others easily translate into how they feel about themselves. Harsh words (“You’re so lazy!”) are harmful, not motivating. When kids absorb negative messages about themselves, they feel bad about themselves, and act accordingly.

- Focus on strengths. Pay attention to what the child does well and enjoys. Make sure the child has opportunities to develop these strengths. Nurturing strengths is better than focusing on weaknesses if you want to help kids feel good about themselves and succeed.

- Teach the child to make positive self-statements. Self-talk is very important in everything we do. Psychologists have found that negative self-talk is behind depression and anxiety. What we think determines how we feel, and how we feel determines how we behave. Therefore, it is important to teach children to be positive about how they “talk to themselves.”
 - Some examples of useful self-talk are: “I can get this problem, if I just keep trying.” “It’s OK if our team lost today. We all tried our best and you can’t win them all.” “It makes me feel good to help others even if the person doesn’t notice or thank me.”

What to do when Children Struggle or Fail

Make clear that your love is unconditional. Let the children know you love them even when they fail or make bad decisions. Mistakes are all a part of the learning process.

Make sure the child's goal are within reach, at a level appropriate for their ability. It may be more important for them to take a step down or back to feel success rather than to work at the higher level.

Offer appropriate praise for their efforts and attitude, especially when they are struggling.

Discussing Self-Esteem with Children and Teens

All children, not just those involved in counseling, could benefit from a discussion on self-esteem and its impact on their happiness and success. You may use the resources on the following pages when working with a child suffering from low self-esteem.

Resources for Working with Children on Self-Esteem

Use the following checklist to determine the child's level of self-esteem. Generate discussion with the child regarding the question at the bottom of the form.

Self-Esteem Check-Up

Directions: Rate from 0 to 10 how much you believe each statement. '0' means you do not believe it at all and '10' means you completely believe it.

Statement	Rating
1. I believe in myself	_____
2. I am just as valuable as other people	_____
3. I would rather be me than someone else	_____
4. I am proud of my accomplishments	_____
5. I feel good when I get compliments	_____
6. I can handle criticism	_____
7. I am good at solving problems	_____
8. I love trying new things	_____
9. I respect myself	_____
10. I like the way I look	_____
11. I love myself even when others reject me	_____
12. I know my positive qualities	_____
13. I focus on my successes and not my failures	_____
14. I'm not afraid to make mistakes	_____
15. I am happy to be me	_____
Total Score	_____

Overall, how would you rate your self esteem on the following scale:

0 _____ 10

I completely dislike who I amI completely like who I am

What would need to change in order for you to move up one point on the rating scale?
(i.e. For example, if you rated yourself a "6" what would need to happen for you to be at a "7"?)

Use this journal to help the child focus on their positives and strengths.

Self-Esteem Journal

MON.	Something I did well today...	
	Today I had fun when...	
	I felt proud when...	
TUE.	Today I accomplished...	
	I had a positive experience with...	
	Something I did for someone...	
WED.	I felt good about myself when...	
	I was proud of someone else...	
	Today was interesting because...	
THUR.	I felt proud when...	
	A positive thing I witnessed...	
	Today I accomplished...	
FRI.	Something I did well today...	
	I had a positive experience with (a person, place, or thing)...	
	I was proud of someone when...	
SAT.	Today I had fun when...	
	Something I did for someone...	
	I felt good about myself when...	
SUN.	A positive thing I witnessed...	
	Today was interesting because...	
	I felt proud when...	