

DEVELOPING SELF-ESTEEM IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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The principles of parenting outlined in this article are from the Helping Encourage Affect Regulation (H.E.A.R.) Parenting Program written by Dr Sarah Landy and offered at the C. M. Hincks Treatment Centre. "Developing self-esteem" is one of 10 steps of this program.

Introduction

The development of a positive sense of self-esteem, so critical to small children, remains of central importance throughout life. Perhaps no experience is more distressing, or more linked to behavioural and emotional disturbance of many kinds, than a diminished sense of worth or a low opinion of oneself. The concept of self-esteem is a pivotal one in theories of human nature and personality development. Most people have a sense of what we mean by the term self-esteem, but defining it is complex and difficult. Theorists generally agree that self-esteem is an individual's subjective evaluation of the extent to which she/he is capable, significant, successful and worthy. Susan Harter (1982), has pointed out that self-esteem is multidimensional and not just experienced as being good or bad, positive or negative. Children may rate themselves very differently on various dimensions, e.g., physical competence, maternal acceptance or social acceptance by peers. Another important fact about self-esteem is that while having positive self-esteem has been equated with all the good things in life and having negative self-esteem with bad, most of us fall somewhere in the middle. In fact, excessive feelings of pride and omnipotence may be negative attributes and lead to distorted personalities and psychological problems. Children need, therefore, to develop a core feeling of competence that is realistic and recognizes both their strengths and weaknesses.

The Development of Self-esteem

The foundation of positive self-esteem is laid down during infancy in relationships with responsive and caring caregivers. These early relationships are affected by characteristics of the child and past memories and current realities of the caregivers (see Figure 1). The first step in developing self-esteem is an infant's realization of her own body boundaries and that she is distinct and separate from her caregiver. This comes naturally out of experiences of being held, touched, rocked, and moved around. At this stage, a sense of self-efficacy (or effectiveness) is developed as the infant begins to act on the environment and gains the experience of causing something to occur or change in some way. Manipulating objects, making noises and a sense of "I can do it" provides a growing sense of self-efficacy. The infant also gains positive feelings of well-being and being worthy if her caregiver is responsive to her needs and requests for attention. Out of this responsiveness, basic trust and a beginning of positive self-esteem develop.

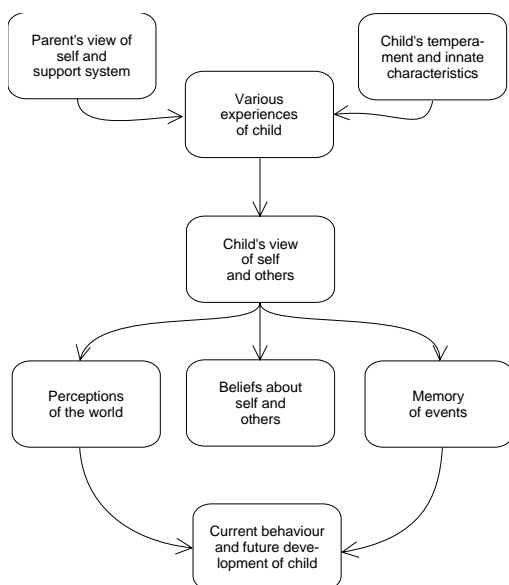
For toddlers who have growing self-knowledge and are pushing for autonomy, self-esteem relies on acceptance, praise and limit-setting given with tolerance and understanding. The way parents handle battles about autonomy will influence the child's self-esteem. The child who wins all battles may not learn self-regulation and will continue to feel like the centre of the universe. The child who loses all battles will have a sense of self marked by feelings of incompetence and worthlessness. During this time children are acutely sensitive to caregivers' emotions and may match their feeling states to those of their caregivers. The self inside the child, at this stage, is in constant flux and exquisitely sensitive to the reactions of those around. By 18 months, the child's sense of self begins to include images and thoughts as well as actions and feelings. The child becomes more aware of himself as an independent being and a dramatic increase in the use of "I" and his own name is usually noted. Increasingly from three years of age, the child's personality becomes more cohesive and integrated. He can now remember events in sequence and this capacity becomes critical in forming narratives about himself within events. By this age, the child's range of significant people will probably include people outside the home such as teachers, neighbours, peers and babysitters. Depending on their closeness and importance, these people may also influence the child's self-esteem. During the stage from three to five years, internal representations stabilize and the child begins to identify with important people in the environment. The sense of self will begin to coalesce between three and six years of age and will continue to influence beliefs and feelings about self and about other people throughout the child's life (see Figure 1). In this way self esteem can influence the current behaviour and future development of the child.

How can caregivers encourage positive self esteem in children?

While there is no exact recipe for developing positive self esteem in children there are some relatively simple principles that can be a helpful guide in providing an environment that can nurture a positive, realistic self-image.

1. Children need unconditional love and to know that they are loved and accepted.

All parents lose their temper at times and feel frustrated with their children, but a basic message needs to be conveyed that



children are accepted as they are. Threats of being sent away and constant put-downs are unacceptable. Such words stay with children and may become the core of a poor sense of self or low self-esteem. Children must know someone cares and although this sense can be given in a variety of ways by parents at different times in their children's lives, the basic message must be: "I CARE ABOUT YOU AND LOVE YOU NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS."

2. Structure situations to help children experience feelings of success.

Providing experiences of success will give young children a positive outlook which will help them face the larger difficulties they will confront later on. Young children are usually highly motivated to help with small household chores, e.g., setting the table, and often delight in completing simple puzzles and joining in a number of games. Making sure a child has some activities he can handle easily will ensure a feeling of competence. Breaking more complicated tasks into smaller elements will help the child experience some successes along the way to full mastery.

3. Give children a feeling of reasonable control over their life.

The self-confident child expects to be able to solve a problem and complete a task and because she feels this way usually can! All children need some sense of control and success. This can come in many ways, e.g., letting children make small decisions such as choosing one or two items on the grocery list, giving him an opinion in seeking a solution to a problem or in planning an activity.

4. Acknowledge children's successes and abilities and notice small gains and effort.

All people like being noticed if they make small gains or have a success. Even if only a small part of a task is done well, it should be noticed. Acknowledgment of effort and encouragement to try

can go a long way to making a child feel competent and worthwhile. This does not mean a child needs constant praise but he does need support for effort.

5. Model a positive view of yourself.

This can be very difficult if parents or other caregivers are exhausted or over-burdened. A child who sees only unhappiness, resentment and frustration will not feel adequate and will gradually model similar emotions and behaviour. Children, like adults, need to have joyful experiences shared with people they love to build self-esteem. Caregivers who are feeling "burnt out" will need to give themselves permission to spend time on themselves. In addition, parents who experienced rejection and little affirmation in their own childhood may find it difficult to feel positive about themselves and will often have to struggle not to repeat a similar cycle of rejection with their own children.

6. Focus on each child's uniqueness and special qualities.

Parents must guard against labelling children "the pretty one," "the easy one," "the selfish one," as such labels stick with children. Labels can make children determined to live up to them; sometimes striving too hard, sometimes giving up or just becoming what their parents want them to be, rather than who they really are or want to become. Being aware of a child's special rhythms, preferences and sensitivities can help structure the environment to avoid many problems. For example, if a child is hypersensitive to sounds or bright lights providing protection from them and comfort when he's overwhelmed will help him gradually learn to deal with them himself. Acknowledging strengths, which all children have, can help a child feel loved and that he has a special place in the family.

7. Intervene when children put themselves down.

Most children at times become discouraged, for example when they are teased by peers or they fail a test. At these times they perceive the world and themselves as negative and even hopeless. Reassuring children about their basic competence and bringing back memories of when they did well and had good experiences will gradually help them integrate their "good" and "bad" parts and see themselves as "good enough" and competent.

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