

Building Healthy Self-Esteem

by Jody Capehart

Positive Self-Esteem

Positive self-esteem is feeling good about yourself. It is feeling important to someone who is important to you. It is feeling productive and confident that you can handle anything that comes your way. It is feeling purposeful and secure about reaching your goals. Self-esteem always expresses itself in the way you act, what you do, and how you behave.

So what are characteristics of positive self-esteem in children? What is the gift we hope to pass on to our students?

Children with positive self-esteem will be proud of their accomplishments. A young child may appear to be bragging on his accomplishments when, in reality, he is just being purely honest about how he feels: "Teacher, look at this neat picture that I painted."

They will handle their frustrations well. Children with a positive self-image will acknowledge that some things in life are truly tough, but they will keep trying. Perseverance is necessary for achieving success with small tasks as well as large tasks: "It's really hard to tie shoes, but I can do it."

They will assume responsibility. A child with high self-esteem will want to assume some responsibility:

"I'll help you."

"I did this project all by myself!"

"I got my contribution money from my bank all by myself."

They will act independently and appropriately. A little child often says, "I do it myself." Children go through a stage of wanting to do things by themselves; however, they do not have the skills to do the things that they want to do. Then, about the time they acquire the skills, they lose the desire. That is precisely why I encourage teachers to train children in skills while the desire is strong. This will do wonderful things for self-esteem!

They will approach new challenges with enthusiasm: "Guess what? Tomorrow we are going to a computer lab. I can't wait!"

They will exhibit a broad range of emotions and feelings that are age appropriate. The key here lies in the word *appropriate*. For example, 4-year-olds are emotionally extreme. They laugh too hard, play too hard, and cry too hard. They love bathroom words. This is appropriate for this age. You still need to train them into appropriate behavior for maturity, but you must remember that they are manifesting appropriate behavior for their age and are not necessarily headed for juvenile hall (even though some days you do wonder).

They will feel that they have a degree of influence over their environment. Children with positive self-esteem can go into a situation where they know no one and yet feel confident they will make friends. We should remember that temperament does play a part in a child's sense of influence over environment. A sanguine child will try

to gain approval through a winning personality. A choleric child will use force to take control of the situation. A melancholy child will be overwhelmed and think that no one likes her and that she has no control over the situation. A phlegmatic child will observe quietly and peacefully from the sidelines and not get too uptight one way or the other.

I believe that each teacher brings to the classroom his own temperaments, gifts, learning style, and personality. As teachers, we need to be wise in training up our students. But we will make mistakes; therefore, the most important legacy we can give our students is to lead them to Jesus Christ, because it is through His sanctifying grace and forgiveness that children can grow beyond many of the mistakes with which we leave them.

Viewing Children as Priceless, Not Worthless

In Dr. Dobson's excellent book on self-esteem, *Hide or Seek*, he says that our society has two criteria for measuring self-worth: beauty and intelligence. He documents these two criteria so well that it is frightening to think of bringing into the world a child who does not possess these qualities.

I know that what he writes is true. As an educator, I was determined to counteract this and to help each child see how very special he or she is. It thrilled me when I saw a child whose self-image had been battered become healed and whole in our school. It happened because we worked hard as a staff to do the following:

- Pray for and with each child.
- See each child as the individual God created him to be and teach him that way.
- Love, touch, and affirm each child each day.

We need to pray that God will open our spiritual eyes to see our students as God created them to be and that He will enable us to embrace our students' unique qualities rather than force them into our mold. We also need to love, touch, and affirm each child in every encounter. It's easy to get in a hurry and just get through the day. But we need to make a conscious effort to look into our students' eyes and truly make contact. The world can be cruel to children, especially if they are a little different. In order to find a harbor in the storm of life, our children need the anchor of parents and teachers who love them unconditionally.

The Fragile Side of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is fragile and intricate, much like a spider web. It is built with much tenacity and care, but it can easily be damaged or torn.

As teachers, we must be wise in how we embrace our students' strengths and weaknesses. We must love our children as God made them. We must communicate that love with our touch, talk, and time. We must be good stewards of what God has given us. We must cherish our children as God created them, then in that cherishing love, challenge them to be all they can be.

Top 10 Self-Esteem Builders

We all want our students to develop positive self-esteem. What can we do to best facilitate this?

1. Love your students unconditionally. Make sure they know it.
2. Talk to your students. Help them understand who they are and how they fit into the kingdom.
3. Listen to your students' fears and worries, joys and triumphs, and be there for them.
4. Provide a variety of experiences so your students will create compensating behaviors instead of defenses to protect them from pain.
5. Help your students to identify and articulate their strengths and weaknesses.
6. Make sure your students feel a significant part of your class, know their position in Christ, feel the power of succeeding at who they are, know the love of people, and experience the pleasure of a life yielded to Christ.
7. Help your students to see the gain in pain, the character of the cross, and the true joy of knowing Jesus. With Jesus at the helm of your students' lives, no storm can be too great, no weight can sink their ship. Jesus is the only way to find peace amidst a storm. Help them to live the Lord's way.
8. Help children to see the gifts that God has given them and show them how to use their gifts for God. For example, a spirit of joy, a patient heart, helpful hands, the gift of mercy.
9. Guide your students into seeing that life is not about their rights, but about doing what is right. Provide a strong moral compass for them in the midst of life's storms.
10. Tell your students that the stages of life they are in are only temporary—those stages won't last forever. Remind them that you will walk the journey with them.

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