Self-esteem in children

Self-esteem in children is nurtured and developed through their relationships with their parents. Children need lots of love and encouragement in order to grow into healthy, happy adults.



A parent's role

The most important thing in a child's life is that they are safe and secure, properly fed and protected from the elements. It seems simple, but without a sense of security, a child may become insecure and learn to distrust others. This security extends to how parents treat their children.

Touch. Nurturing through touch is essential for a child's healthy development. Touching helps the infant's brain develop by conveying love, care, comfort, support and nurturing. Recently, more and more parents are discovering the positive effects of massaging babies. Research shows that massaging increases a child's immune system and makes babies healthier.

Love. Children who are loved will see themselves as lovable. Through verbal expression, nurturing actions, and the joy and pleasure you show your children, love is expressed. Though you might feel angry with your child, you can learn to express this anger without taking away the love that you feel for him or her. Let children know that you love them regardless of what they do.

Acceptance. A child learns self-acceptance by having their thoughts and feelings accepted by their parents. Listen to and acknowledge your child's thoughts and feelings. Accepting your son or daughter's nature, temperament, interests and aspirations is important to development. As parents, we may not always agree with our children's outlook or interests, but it's imperative to accept their uniqueness.

Respect. Children whose parents treat him or her with respect discover self-respect naturally. Treat others as you would have them treat you. This goes for children as well. If you want your children to grow up with self-respect, then show them the respect you'd give another adult. If a child spills a drink, then say to him or her, "Oops you spilled your drink, get a towel to clean it up," rather than, "You are so clumsy!" Be careful of what you say to your children; they just may believe you.

Visibility. Visibility is the sense that we are seen and understood. It's having our joy and happiness shared with another, or receiving empathy when we are sad. It's the feeling that we are experiencing the same reality and are at the same place. Your child wants to be seen, heard and understood. They look to you for feedback on what they are experiencing. If a child breaks a toy by accident, sharing in the sadness tells him or her that they are understood. When we convey love, appreciation, empathy, acceptance and respect, we make a child visible.

Age-appropriate nurturing. Age-appropriate nurturing goes hand-in-hand with a child's level of development. At six months of age a child is fed, whereas at six years of age a child feeds him/herself. Support your child's independence by offering choices that are in line with his or her level of development. A six-year-old, for example, should be able to choose what he or she wants to wear, within certain boundaries.

Proper praise and criticism. Through proper praise and criticism you'll help build your child's healthy self-esteem. Praise children specifically on their accomplishments instead of making generalized statements. If a sister helps her younger brother with his drawing, praise her with, "That was very nice of you. I'm sure your little brother will learn a lot from you." Conversely, saying, "You're a good girl," isn't nearly as effective because it doesn't stress the importance of self-reliance, self-direction and self-control.

Criticism needs to be directed at children's behaviour, never at the child. Give criticism without putting children down. Respecting your children's self-esteem is one of the most important and challenging parts of parenting.

Healthy parental expectations. We expect children to learn values and morals of our society and culture.

We assume they'll learn and master certain things and eventually become completely independent. Children feel more secure when they understand and know what is expected of them. Parental expectations—so long as they're realistic, reasonable and match the child's level of development—will boost your children's self-esteem and cultivate a sense of security.

By developing an open, honest and positive relationship with your children, you can foster relationships that are supportive, loving and encouraging. Relationships are the building blocks of self-esteem and will help your children grow into happy, confident adults.