self-esteem
Self-esteem is feeling good about yourself, feeling that you are a worthwhile person. While we all have doubts at times, it is important for children to feel okay about themselves most of the time. Self-esteem enables them to try new things without too much fear of failing, to reach out and make friends, and to manage problems they are likely to meet along the way. Good self-esteem builds a solid foundation for life.

What is self-esteem?

- Self-esteem is liking yourself. It is not conceit or boastfulness, but believing in yourself and what you do.

- Self-esteem is how you feel about yourself as a person and knowing that there are things that you can do well - in other words it is about being and about doing.

- Part of self-esteem is feeling that you have a place in the world where you belong - that you are part of a family where you matter. It is knowing about your roots and having confidence in your future. This can be a problem for children who have come from other countries and lost touch with their ‘roots’. It can also be a problem for children who have been part of a family break up if they are split off from part of their family and the history of that part of the family.
Self-esteem is about what matters to you. If you want to be good at sport but everyone tells you that you are good at art, it will not help your self-esteem very much. If you get encouragement and help in something you want to do, and you succeed, your self-esteem will grow.

How self-esteem is developed

Babies

Very young babies don’t have a sense of themselves as being separate human beings so they don’t really have self-esteem as such. They gradually learn that they are loved and lovable because people care for them gently, look after them when they cry and smile at them consistently. When this happens it says to the baby – ‘you matter in the world’.

Toddlers

As infants grow to become toddlers, they still don’t have a complete understanding about themselves. For example, if a one year old is standing on the end of a rope that she is trying to pull, she may not move her feet off the rope. This is because she doesn’t yet realise that both the feet and the hands belong to her. One year olds still don’t understand that all of their body and mind belong to them. Every time they learn a new skill they add to their sense of being able to do things and learning who they are.
When they say ‘No’ they are really saying ‘I am learning that I am a separate person and this is very exciting and important for me. I can practise this by saying ‘No’ even if I do want the ice-cream that you are giving me’.

Toddlers learn about themselves by learning what they look like, what they can do and where they belong. They find it very difficult to share because they are just learning who they are and what is theirs.

Toddlers see themselves through their parents’ eyes. If their parents see them as special and lovable and show them and tell them this often, they will develop self-esteem. If they keep getting messages that they are not lovable or a nuisance they will not so easily develop self-esteem.

Pre-schoolers

By three or so children have learned that their bodies and minds are their own. They can manage time away from their parents or main caregivers because they have an inner sense of feeling safe. They still learn their self-esteem in fairly physical ways, by comparing themselves with others, e.g. who is the tallest, who is the fastest.

Primary school age children

Many children’s self-esteem falls when they start school and have to cope in a strange new situation with lots of other new children and new rules to learn. Self-esteem in the primary school years is about how well children manage the learning tasks of the
school, how they do at sport, how they look and how they can make friends with other children. Stresses at home such as parents fighting with each other can affect children’s self-esteem. So can problems at school such as having trouble with schoolwork, being bullied or not having friends.

Adolescence

- In adolescence self-esteem can be affected by the physical and hormone changes, and most importantly by how they look or how they think they look. Young people who have a goal in life often do a bit better in the self esteem stakes. So do those whose families are there to support them. Belonging to a group of friends is also very important to adolescents’ self-esteem. This is why they seem so attached to the telephone and to wanting to do what their friends are doing.

What parents can do

For almost all parents there are times when you worry about your child’s self-esteem.

Here are some things you can do to help.

- Tell your child often that you love her and let her see that you are glad she is who she is.

- Show your child that you love her by spending time with her, listening to her point of view, and being willing to help her achieve her goals, e.g. drive her to sport and watch when she plays.
- Support her school work - take an interest without taking over. Support school working bees or tuck shop if you can.

- Encourage friendships and make her friends welcome and get to know them.

- If she needs extra help with school work try to provide this but don’t make all her life practise at what she is not good at - children need to practise what they are good at to feel successful.

- Talk with the teacher. A good relationship between school and home is very important.

- Help your child to explore any hobbies that she is interested in.

- Help your child feel that she is needed in your family. Within reason for the child’s age, ask and expect some help with the family chores such as feeding pets, setting the table etc. (not just clean up her own mess but contribute to the family).

- Let your child assist you with something e.g. teenagers may be better than you at making the video work.

- When you play games with your primary school age child make sure that she has opportunities to win. If children win sometimes it is easier for them to learn to be good losers.

- Involve them in the wider family; help them to know their relatives and about your family and its history.

- Keep special mementoes of their successes and important milestones.
Keep little family rituals e.g. a story at bedtime, kiss goodbye and the other ways of doing things that are special to your family.

Celebrate achievements and successes.

Don’t solve all problems for your child. Help her learn problem solving skills and learn to feel that she can manage many things for herself. Show her that you have faith in her.

If children have had a lot of changes, such as coming from another country, parents separating, or even moving house a lot, try and keep them in touch with their roots as much as you can. Keep a diary with pictures of where they have been. Try to keep them in touch with both sides of the family if possible. Let them know what you can about their family history. Adopted children can have two sets of roots. Adolescents are often especially interested in finding out about their background as part of working out who they are.

Messages that help destroy children’s self-esteem

- Ignoring them and not taking an interest in them.
- Messages that say you do not like the child e.g. ‘I love you but I don’t like you’.
- ‘You are...’ messages that say something bad about them as people e.g. ‘You are... lazy, untidy, naughty, a nuisance, a bully, shy, a sook.....’
Comparing them with others, especially brothers and sisters.

Giving messages that life would be better without them e.g. ‘If it weren’t for the children we could have a good holiday’ or ‘I wish you hadn’t been born’.

Threatening to leave them if they do not do as you wish.

Frowning or sighing when they want to talk to you or ask you for something.

What parents can do for adolescents

Adolescents are undergoing major changes in their lives as they prepare for young adulthood and their self-esteem is often shaky.

Parents can help by showing that you believe in them and encouraging them. Even if they deny it when you tell them that they look good, the message goes in. Don’t let ‘brush offs’ put you off! For example, ‘You look really great with your hair that way, Jack’. ‘You’re just saying that because you’re my mother. You’re biased’. ‘Well I am your mother but that is what I think’.

Even if it takes much nagging and explaining that it is part of belonging to the family, not just their job, still expect some help in the home. This says to your teenager that he is valued and needed as part of the family.
Try and take an interest in their interests. For example, try to find something you like in their music. Ask them about the words of the songs and what they mean, but don’t criticise.

Listen to their opinions without always having a better or wiser answer. Help them to explore their own ideas. Let them know that they don’t have to have the same opinions as you.

Ask their help or advice sometimes. Show that you don’t have all the answers.

When something is really important to them, sometimes go out of your way to help them achieve it, even if you don’t think it matters.

Take an interest in their school work, hobbies and sport and let them know that you are proud of their achievements.

Keep them involved in the family. Expect them to attend special family celebrations and occasions, such as Christmas, even if they don’t stay long.

When they make mistakes due to wanting to try their wings, see them as mistakes to learn from. Let them know that is how most of us learn to do better.

Hang in there. When young people are the most trying, it is usually because they are not feeling good. This is the time they need to know that you are hanging in there with them.
Special tips for parents

- It is important to look after your own self-esteem too. It is part of good parenting to let your children see that you feel good about yourself.

- Take time out for yourself regularly. Do some things you really enjoy or feel proud of. For example, take a bubble bath, join a team, read a book, go for a walk or run, go to a movie, learn something new.

- Spend some time with friends who support you and help you to feel good.

- If you have a partner make sure that you keep regular time to be together.

- If your children are growing up start thinking about branching out into new interests for yourself.
Reminders

- Self-esteem is very important for everyone.
- Young children learn self-esteem through what they can do and through what their parents think of them.
- ‘Put down’ messages really damage self-esteem.
- ‘Doing’ messages such as giving time, hugs and smiles are very important in building self-esteem.
- Keep giving sincere messages that build self-esteem to your adolescents, even if they say they don’t believe you. These messages matter.
- Self-esteem is learned and can be changed.
- Take care of your own self-esteem as well.
For more information contact:

- Local Community Child or School Health Nurse
- Local Family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline
  8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. 7 days a week
  Telephone (08) 9368 9368
  Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 111 546
  www.ngala.com.au
- Parent Help Centre/Parenting Line
  Telephone (08) 9272 1466 (24 hr service)
  Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 654 432
- Kids Help Line
  Freecall 1800 55 1800 (24 hr service)
  www.kidshelp.com.au

Books for parents:


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