A well-developed self-esteem is undeniably one of the most important foundations a child needs in order to develop to their full potential. So, what do we mean by self-esteem? Self-esteem is defined as the confidence a person has in his or her own abilities or worth. One can assume that having a good self-esteem is therefore an excellent precursor for self-motivation and a high degree of success in all areas of life.

Why is having a good self-esteem so important?

As parents, we strive to ensure that our children are given the best opportunities to develop into healthy, successful and self-sufficient adults. Unfortunately, as our children develop and grow, we become more limited in the control we have over their lives. Suddenly, parents’ opinions are not as important anymore and our children look to their peers for acceptance and recognition.

Encouraging and developing our children’s self-esteem while they are young allows them to gain the tools they need to reach their full potential. If children have a firm belief in themselves and their worth, they are better able to make decisions that allow them to reach their long-term goals.

Children with a high self-esteem:

- Show good levels of responsibility for their decisions because they are confident in themselves and their abilities.
- Tend to talk positively about themselves and are better able to understand and regulate their emotions.
- Are more able to tolerate frustration and their mistakes because they understand that despite their mistakes, they are still capable individuals who can learn and grow.
- Are more willing to ask for help and are able to cope easily with constructive feedback.
- Find it easier to remain grounded in their belief systems and are therefore more resistant to the negative pressures placed on them by their peers and environment.
- Tend to choose friends who accept and affirm who they are rather than those who try to change them.
- Are able to stand up for themselves and surround themselves with peers who have similar goals and belief systems to them.
- Are internally motivated to do well.

When children are young, parents have the primary responsibility for developing their children’s sense of self-worth. “Parents need to fill a child's bucket of self-esteem so high that the rest of the world can’t poke enough holes to drain it dry” (Alvin Price). Below are some practical ways to build your child’s self-esteem every day.

Practical ways of developing your child’s self-esteem:

✓ Praise and encourage your child daily.

Find the things that you like about your child and focus on those. Notice when they behave in a way that you like and praise them for this. For example: “I really like the way you listened to me the first time I spoke” or “You look very pretty today, that colour is lovely on you”.

A good idea is to place a frame on the fridge in which you put a piece of paper with something positive about your child. Each week, change the paper and allow your child to keep each one in a treasure box that they can refer to when they need a boost.

✓ Spend quality time with your child.

Life is busy. It is essential that your child feels that they are also a priority in your life. Spending special time with your child allows them to feel valued and that they are worth something to you. If they feel that they are worth something to you then they are more likely to feel worthy as people overall. This does not mean that you need an entire day each week set aside for your child. Spending 5 minutes a day dedicated completely to your child will help them to feel secure and to know that they are important too. Examples of quality time may be: having hot chocolate together; reading a story; or chatting about their day. Cell-phones are NOT allowed.
✓ Promote and praise independent behaviour.

When our children are young, we tend to find it easier to do everything for them. This sends them the message that we do not think they are capable of doing things on their own. A child who does not believe they are capable is also not confident to try things on their own. Decide what you will allow your child to do and encourage and praise them for doing it.

Examples could include: allowing them to decide what to wear (a choice between two outfits is a good idea); age-appropriate chores such as feeding pets, making beds and washing dishes; packing their own school lunch (with guidance on what to pack); packing their school bag; and independently researching for projects and assignments (with guidance).

✓ Have realistic expectations of your child.

It is important to remember that no two children are the same, nor do they have the same skills or level of ability. Consider what your child is able to achieve and work on expanding these achievements. It is difficult for a child to reach goals that are unrealistic. Constant failure causes a child to doubt themselves and their abilities. For example: A child who struggles with English may not necessarily want to sit and read an entire English novel. It is unrealistic to expect them to do so. However, this same child could be praised for completing a short story or for showing an interest in reading. Even the smallest improvements should be recognised and praised.

✓ Recognise mistakes.

An important part of developing a good self-esteem is learning to recognise that everyone makes mistakes and that this is okay. Mistakes and failures should be seen as opportunities to develop and learn. Recognise when your child makes a mistake and work to correct it. Equally important is your ability, as a parent, to recognise your own mistakes and to discuss what should happen in the future or how you will try to not make the same mistake again.

✓ Label the behaviour, not the child.

As an upset parent, one tends to say things to a child such as “You are naughty” or “I cannot deal with you anymore”. Unfortunately, these types of statements create a negative sense of self for a child in which they believe they are naughty or difficult. Instead, one should focus on labelling the behaviour that is inappropriate. For example: “Your behaviour towards me is unacceptable” or “I did not like it when you did...” It is easier for a child to correct their behaviour when they see it as part of who they are rather than as their entire definition.

✓ Encourage the development of problem-solving skills.

Learning to use problem-solving skills will empower your child. Instead of solving problems for your child, help them to brainstorm possible solutions to problems they face. For example: if your child is bullied at school, try and avoid rushing in to ‘fix’ the problem. Rather discuss possible solutions and their consequences. For example: hitting the bully may mean your child gets into trouble versus telling the teacher which will allow her to help.

✓ Accept that your child has his or her own opinions and feelings.

Although we may not necessarily give in to our children, it is important to recognise their feelings and opinions. Your child may not always like or be accepting of the decisions that you make—this should be acknowledged and worked through. By acknowledging their opinions and feelings, you allow them to feel valued and to develop a sense of importance as individuals. Where possible, negotiate different decisions with your child. For example, “You are not allowed to go out both days on the weekend with your friends. However, you can choose which day you see them.” It is important to explain the decisions that you make as a parent so that your child can learn and understand the boundaries that you put in place. This will help them to feel that they are worth caring about and protecting.

As parents, we are entrusted and empowered with the responsibility of raising children who—and one day as adults too—are confident and trust in their own abilities or self-worth. Self-esteem then is one of the most precious, valuable, and enduring experiences of the self-in-interaction. How are you raising your superhero today?

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