

Parent's Pages - Building Self Esteem

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Ask any second grade class of students, "Do you love yourself?" and most children will raise and wave their hands and say "Yesss!" By high school that number has taken a considerable dive.

Developmentally the adolescent's job is to separate from the family, become an independent individual capable of making choices and being able to take care of her/himself. This is difficult to do when one is emotionally hurting and has self-esteem issues. What can we as adults do to make a difference in helping teens accept themselves, think about their values, make healthy lifestyle choices, develop integrity and a conscience, and be responsible. First, let us define self-esteem and look at characteristics of high and low self esteem. Then we will discuss ways to positively help our youth.

Self-esteem, very simply, is how one feels about oneself. It may be high or low and is based on a personal assessment of self. The things one tells oneself and the images one sends oneself may be true or they may be false. With high self-esteem, one has a strong internal locus of control, and is therefore able to evaluate and think about choices and consequences. One is less manipulated by negative peer pressure and the desire to please others when it goes against one's value system.

Other characteristics of high self-esteem are liking oneself, knowing oneself and only trying to be oneself, extending kindness and compassion to others because it is done to self first, taking positive risks to learn new things, and accepting self even if wanting to change some things about one's personality, habits, etc. It is being able to honestly assess strengths and weaknesses, to take responsibility for choices, to be honest with self when having a problem or making a mistake, and making amends if actions or words hurt another or overstep boundaries, to name a few.

How would we recognize a person with low self-esteem? We would look for extremes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We might notice one who tries to dominate with their opinions or one who has no opinions to express. One who has a short fuse emotionally and is constantly reacting to others or one who does not feel their feelings and emotions also gives us clues that someone is hurting with low self-esteem. Looking at behaviors, we note the person who does not take care of her/his appearance or the person who is overly concerned about looks, popularity, and name brands. A person with low self-esteem is more concerned with what other people think about them and being accepted, than what they think about themselves. It is important to note here that one who boasts and brags does not have too much self-esteem, as some people believe. On the contrary, they are suffering from low self-esteem. A person with either an inferiority or superiority complex gives us a clue she/he is suffering from low self-esteem.

Now we will look at three helpful ways to positively impact youth with their self-esteem. It is helpful to introduce concepts that reinforce positive emotional health. For example, we can teach that there is value in each individual, that is each is lovable and capable, and it makes a difference that each is in the world, no matter what the circumstances. Another is that poor choices and bad behavior are not who a person is, but, the result of unawareness. We need to separate one's behavior from the essence of who one is. As each person learns and grows from experience, wisdom is gained as well as the ability to make healthy, wise choices. These and many more concepts will benefit youth, helping them grow into mature, responsible adults.