



Tips for Parents: Student Self-Esteem

The greatest gift of all

Giving your children the best of everything doesn't mean buying them the latest tennis shoes or toys. You need to make sure your children have confidence, a sense of purpose, and a belief in their own abilities. Good self-esteem is as important as good nutrition, good health, and more important than making good grades.

What is self-esteem? Self-esteem is the opinion we have about ourselves. It means more than just saying, "I like myself." We need to feel confident that we can take care of ourselves, set and accomplish goals, and contribute to our surroundings in a positive way. We need to feel capable of dealing with the basic tasks that daily life requires, as well as unexpected challenges.

You can encourage the development of good self-esteem by building on your children's strengths. Rather than complaining about all the bad things your kids are doing, catch them doing something—and it doesn't have to be a big something—right, and comment on it. In other words, acknowledge that first positive step in the right direction. Focus your attention, and praise, on something positive your child has started doing when it comes to homework (like turning off the TV and sitting down voluntarily to complete assignments at the kitchen table)--you're recognizing an important change in behavior. Building on strengths and expressing appreciation for effort helps develop your child's self-esteem.

Achievement is a vital part of self-esteem

Help your children learn to do things for themselves. When children have a feeling of independence, they have more confidence to try new things and expand their capabilities. Allow your children to take care of themselves as much as possible. Let them choose which clothes to wear each morning, when to do their homework (within reason), and make other basic decisions about their own life.

Encourage your children to learn new things. Whether it's riding a bike or memorizing multiplication tables, children feel pride in expanding their world of knowledge. Remember how you felt when you first rode a bike around the block—a tremendous amount of accomplishment. The more children learn, the more they believe they are able to learn. Such experiences are invaluable for your child's personal growth and development of good self-esteem.

Keep track of new accomplishments. This can be done in a number of ways. For example, you might start a scrapbook of your children's progress in school or in a hobby. You can put up drawings to make an informal "gallery", or create a song book of songs they've learned. Make a chart to record the books they've read. Find creative ways to keep track of anything your children accomplish that they're proud to have done.

Respect and self-esteem go hand in hand.

Teach your children that they are respected. Show children that their feelings and ideas matter. When making household decisions, be sure to include your children. To the extent appropriate, they should have a voice in whatever affects them directly. Ask their opinions and show that you are listening and taking their feelings into account.

Teach your children to respect others. The best way to teach respect for others is by example. If you respect other people, regardless of who they are or where they come from, your children will follow in your footsteps.

What schools can do¹

Another kind of positive feedback that teachers can offer students is appreciation. For example, if a child poses a thoughtful question on a subject, the teacher might come to class the next day with a new reference book on the subject. It is important that teachers show appreciation for the pupils' concerns without taking their minds off the subjects at hand.

When children see that their concerns and interest are taken seriously, they are more likely to take their own ideas seriously. Teachers who show appreciation will encourage children to wonder, reflect, and generate solutions to problems.

When children are engaged in challenging activities, they are bound to experience occasional failures. But as long as the teacher accepts the child's feelings and responds respectfully, the child is more likely to learn from the incident.

For more information:

Books:

Sher, Barbara. "Self-Esteem Games: 300 Fun Activities That Make Children Feel Good about Themselves." John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 1998

Kaufman, Gerhen; Raphael, Lev; Espeland, Pamela. "Stick Up for Yourself: Every Kid's Guide to Personal Power & Positive Self-Esteem." Freespirit Publishing Inc., 1999.

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¹ Adapted from ERIC/EECE Newsletter, Oct. 1993, L.G. Katz