



BUILDING A CHILD'S SELF ESTEEM WITH LOVE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

In pediatrics it is not only important that we treat and cure illness and diseases, it is also imperative that we *prevent* diseases including mental illness. The most common mental illnesses we encounter on a daily basis are anxiety and depression, which are almost always caused by low self-esteem. Insecurity and trust within oneself can affect everything in a child's life from their relationships, to how they perform in school. In this newsletter, we will look at common identifiers and methods which can help build your child's self-esteem and recognize risk factors.

No one is perfect in all aspects of life, however it is important for a child to at least feel valued or have purpose in these areas of their life. Below are four key pillars which are important to consider when evaluating different areas of your child's life:

- 1) Academic: Related to feelings of success or failure at school.
- 2) Social: The type and quality of relationships a child has.
- 3) Body image: Acceptance or rejection of physical features.
- 4) Family: Sense of belonging, being loved and the importance to others.

Why is self-esteem so important?

Self-esteem is important because it affects every emotional aspect in a person's life. Children are particularly vulnerable as they grow and develop because they don't have the developmental skills to cope or rationalize adult behavior, which puts them at a higher risk for low self-esteem.

A child with a healthy self-esteem will exhibit the following traits:

- **Sense of trust, competence and pride
- **Ability to build strong relationships with family and friends
- **Demonstrates responsibility, purpose and belonging
- **Capacity to handle stressful situations

If a child has low self-esteem they tend to:

- **Hesitate to take risks or move out of their comfort zone
- **Lack motivation
- **Feel and show sadness/depression
- **Be anxious

Parents (or adults who interact with children regularly) can help children develop a healthy self-esteem by:

1. **Showing love and affection:** Children who grow up in an atmosphere filled with affection and unconditional acceptance tend to develop positive attitudes toward life and will get a subconscious feeling that they are important enough to be loved. Children need to know that even when they make mistakes and experience failures significant adults in their lives value them. A great way for parents to express they value their children is to spend time together in an activity of the child's choice.
2. **Give honest and positive feedback:** Compliment your child often and encourage good behavior. However, empty praise and flattery that is not grounded in reality tends to do more harm than good by undermining responsible and productive behavior. This can also inflate the child's ego which will eventually have a negative effect in his/her self-esteem.
3. **Set appropriate goals and expectations:** Goals should be attainable and suited for the child's age and capabilities in order to provide opportunities for success. For example, asking a 4-year-old to dress themselves and then rewarding them with positive feedback. Learning to help others gives children a sense that they have something important to contribute and this provides the child with a sense of belonging.
4. **Teach problem solving skills:** Children who are not held accountable for their mistakes do not learn how to problem solve and as a result blame others for their mistakes. Children should be encouraged to brainstorm, seek out solutions, and be allowed to take the lead in correcting it. If needed, support can be provided.
5. **Be a positive role model:** Parents who are too harsh or negative about themselves will have difficulty enhancing a child's self-esteem. It is important for parents to nurture their self-esteem and take care of their own physical and emotional well-being.

What if my child has low self-esteem?

If you feel that your child is struggling with a poor self-image or lack of self-esteem, it is important to consider getting professional help. Therapists can help your child identify coping strategies useful in dealing with problems at school and at home.

The greatest gift parents can give to their children is to help them gather the information and skills to promote their competence and capabilities to overcome the challenges of the world. A positive attitude in life is the key to success. Always remember to tell your child on a regular basis that you will love them unconditionally. The love that is provided to them directly influences the love they have for themselves.