

The Importance of Self-Esteem



There is no subject more important to those who interact with young people than the subject of self-esteem, and how to develop it in children. The psychological need for self-esteem is crucial at every point in the life of any person, including very young children. Self-esteem profoundly influences all that we are, and all that we become. Lack of self-esteem can be found at the base of many, if not all, serious psychological problems and harmful behavior.

A youth's self-regard will influence every facet of her or his life. It is self-esteem that will enable children to experience satisfaction in achievement, a sense of fulfillment, contentment with themselves, and most importantly the means to meet the challenges, both positive and negative, that are inevitable in life.

Genuine self-esteem bears no stamp that reads, "Happiness Guaranteed." With self-esteem, children cannot be vaccinated against failure, disappointment, or error, but it is self-esteem that ensures them against the possibility of becoming arrogant or self-righteous on the one hand or hopeless and self-condemning on the other hand. With genuine self-esteem, a youth will be able to say, "No matter what happens to me or around me, I stand firm in the knowledge that my life and the living of it is of value."

With genuine self-esteem, every child is more apt to be more content, to be better adjusted, and to achieve more success. Genuine self-esteem is guaranteed to provide an inner psychological security, despite challenging circumstances that are present in the life of every human being.

Our vision is that all children find within themselves the ability to reach their highest potential for capability and goodness, psychological security and inner well-being.

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Most of us sense, at least to some degree, that our lives have some meaningful purpose. Self-esteem is one of the most fundamental of all human needs, and if we fail to understand and use sound principles of self-esteem, our self-esteem can be in great jeopardy.

Youths' self-concept must allow them to realistically believe that they are becoming more and more capable and more and more worthy or "good." Self-respect, integrity, self-valuing, self-worth, and self-esteem are all synonymous. There is, however, one essential thing to remember: **Self-esteem cannot be given. It must be earned.**

By using certain words, teaching certain concepts, and by what we model in our behavior as adults, we can teach youth principles and skills that are guaranteed to nurture the development of a healthy and genuine self-esteem.

We adults have a powerful influence in the lives of young people, so we must learn to create environments where youth can legitimately earn their own sense of self-esteem. Our role as teachers is to help youth develop the skills, concepts, behaviors, and attitudes that are the foundation of genuine self-esteem and integrity, which in turn will help make them the very best individuals that they can be. A genuine self-esteem will ensure their emotional and psychological security over the course of their entire lives.

At the apex of this theory of self-esteem is found the idea that each human life should be of immense good and great value. Every human being becomes his or her own custodian of that valuable goodness. Thus, one's own life, welfare, happiness, and fulfillment become a trust that is worthy of the highest degree of respect. This inner respect and this inner striving for good, we call self-esteem.



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SELF-ESTEEM

What is self-esteem, and why is it important?

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A. Self-esteem is best defined as one's own, realistic, positive, inner valuing of oneself, based on genuine striving to become a more capable and worthy person. The word "capable" refers to one's practical ability and competence. The word "worthy" refers to one's ability to act in a manner which is consistent with concepts as honor, honesty, morality, and justice.

Self-esteem does not depend on any outer circumstances. When we have real self-esteem, we stand firm in the conviction that neither success, nor the lure of success, can tempt us to give up the high standards that keeping our self-esteem demands of us. Furthermore, and equally important, with real self-esteem, no adversity, no disappointment, no failures however great, can ever rob us of the enduring inner conviction that our lives are worth living, and our values worthy of the highest reward.

Self-esteem is independent of the opinions of others. Persons of real self-esteem may choose to care about, listen to, be influenced by, or value others' opinions of them and their actions, but they understand and live by the knowledge that self esteem does not have its source in the judgments of others.

Self-esteem is independent of intellectual endowment, economic and social advantage or disadvantage: self-esteem cannot be given; it must be earned. There is no one path which leads to a fulfilled life and to self-esteem. Any so-called advantage can be as much a detriment as a help in life, and any so-called disadvantage can be as much a help as a detriment. Each individual must chart his or her own course, and it is not the point of departure which determines the ability to enjoy the psychological security of self-esteem. It is the effort that goes into the voyage that determines its causality.

With genuine self-esteem, every individual is much more apt to find holiness, to be more content, to be better adjusted, and to achieve more success. It is, however, important to note that there is only one guarantee that comes with genuine self-esteem. With it, one is assured of psychological security, because with it, one respects and values life and the living of it to its fullest and best.

Q. What are the signs of low self-esteem?

A. A person with low self-esteem exhibits certain behaviors, actions, and attitudes that are hallmarks of a low sense of self-valuing. Look for the following:

- An inability or unwillingness to recognize or admit mistakes and their consequences;
- A resistance to accepting the consequences of errors and mistakes;
- The behavioral expression of excessive guilt when mistakes are made, or when performance doesn't meet expectations;
- An inability or unwillingness to accept responsibility for possessions, actions, duties, or obligations;

- An excessive and inappropriate sense of obligation for the responsibilities of others;
- Frequent emotional outbursts, exemplifying, a lack of self-control about events or happenings;
- A lack of trustworthiness;
- An excessive dependence on the opinions or commendations of others; an excessive reliance on the praise or recognition of others to justify a good performance;
- The constant need for attention and recognition;
- The use of "put-downs," criticism, teasing, or bullying of others;
- The need to win at all costs in order to feel successful, even at the expense of others;
- The failure to recognize the rights of others;
- The inability to be able to stand up for oneself, in age-appropriate circumstances or conditions.

Q. Can self-esteem really be taught, or is it just part of one's personality?

A. Self-esteem is not like riding a bicycle: once learned, never forgotten. It must be earned and re-earned countless times in a lifetime, and it will be challenged continuously -- numerous times often in a week or even a day. Subsequently, it is a "subject" that must be understood - its essence, its source, its principles, its related knowledge and constructs, its definition, its antithesis, its conditions and therefore taught carefully and systematically.

Q. How early can we begin to develop self-esteem, and is it ever too late to develop it if it has been severely damaged?

A. The development of self-esteem begins as early as one's first interactions and relationships. How we speak to children, what we emphasize, what we reward, how we view mistakes and failures, what we model - all contribute in the earliest years to the development of both self-esteem and self-image. Although definitive research is still on-going in this area, self-esteem probably develops in discreet stages, which have specific characteristics.

Conversely, since self-esteem is earned and not given, it is never too late to learn or understand or develop the capacity to earn self-esteem. The principles of self-esteem apply to people of all ages and of all cultures and of all religions and of all socioeconomic backgrounds. We all work to earn our self-esteem throughout a lifetime, so it can never be "too late." However, the earlier begun, the more successful the endeavor; like many other skills, while not impossible to learn at a later age, the earlier one begins, the better. With regard to children or adults whose self-esteem has been severely damaged, it will take more work and more effort to "undo" the previous learning and rebuild even the most basic sense of self-esteem; as with many things in our lives, it will be harder to "unlearn" habits, behaviors, and attitudes than it will be to learn them from the beginning.