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Self-Esteem in Children – Part Two By Paul J. Ashton, Psy.D., D.Min

Death and life are in the power of the tongue....
-Proverbs 18:21

The Protecting God's Children® program addresses the importance of being proactively involved in the lives of children and young people. In so doing, you form them with your values and to develop a strong foundation upon which to draw when faced with difficulties. Most importantly, through open, honest and direct communication, you encourage good behavior and can monitor who your children spend time with, who their friends are, the families of their friends, and how they occupy their time.

The key to the process is honest communication which builds trust. In the previous article of this series, we discussed the importance of a child's self esteem. This article continues that discussion and further offers ways in which we can build up the self esteem of the children who are in our care.

Characteristics of Children with High Self Esteem – Most of the time, children with high self esteem will:

- make friends easily
- show enthusiasm for new activities
- be cooperative and follow age-appropriate rules
- control their behavior
- play by themselves and/or with other children
- like being creative and have their own ideas
- be happy, full of energy, and talk to others without much encouragement

Characteristics of Children with Low Self Esteem—Often, children with low self esteem will say or think things such as:

- "I can't do anything well."
- "I know I can't do it."
- "I know that I will fail."
- "I don't like me. I wish I were someone else."¹

Listening is the most important tool in communication. When listening to children, make sure you pay close attention, allowing them to speak their full story. Listen with attentive eyes and use facial expressions that are positive and encouraging.

- Don't distract yourself with details. Listen for the point of the story and give feedback relevant to the point.
- Don't try to fix things. Children usually want to share and experience, not hear a solution. Learning to solve problems helps to build self-esteem.
- If necessary, help a young child find words to describe their feelings.²

Accepting your child—the good and the bad—is crucial in assisting him or her find self-acceptance. Your job as a caring adult is to make your child feel valuable, loved, and special. Focus on changing the behavior that is important to change, i.e., behavior that isolates or harms your child or disrupts the family. Consider doing the following:

- Reinforce and nurture your children’s talents and help them recognize their talents
- See negative behavior in the context of who your child is³

When correcting the behavior of a child, using the language of self-esteem allows them to see the difference between their own worth and their behavior. Describing their behavior without judging the child is important because it addresses the behavior; it doesn’t label a child as good or bad. A child will be much less likely to feel that their basic value and self worth is diminished.⁴

- Share the reasons behind your reactions.
- Validate their experience so that they see they are a worthy person even when being corrected.
- Be certain to separate their behavior from them. For example, do not call them “bad.” Instead refer to their actions and be firm, direct, and truthful about how their behavior can cause harm to them or someone else.

Be sincere with praise and affirmation. While affirming a child is very important, be truthful about your praise and be sincere. Children are unlikely to have their self-esteem strengthened from excessive praise or flattery. On the contrary, it may raise some doubts in children; many children can see through flattery and may even dismiss an adult who heaps on praise as a poor source of support—one who is not very believable.⁵

Setting boundaries and using discipline helps children to maintain a safe life. Discipline is an important part of raising a child and allows them to prepare for failures in their later life that are inevitable. Rules, regulations, and boundaries allow for the physical and emotional safety of the child. Affirming them as a child truly loved by God allows them to accept that others, too, are loved and special. Praising children when they maintain a boundary is crucial, as is offering consequences when boundaries are violated or broken. In teaching them responsibility, you teach them the important value of respect for you, others, and God.

1 National Network for Child Care - NNCC. Nuttall, P. (1991). *Self-esteem and children*. (Family Day Care Facts series). Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts.

2 www.cyberparent.com/esteem/grow 8/17/08

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid

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