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# Understanding Children



## *Self-esteem*

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Do you sometimes wish you could slip your child a dose of healthy self-esteem that would last a lifetime? A great idea, but hard to do!

The development of self-esteem is a lifelong task. From our first breath to the last, we are all developing, refining, and changing our sense of self-worth and identity.

Self-esteem involves developing a sense of self-worth by feeling lovable and capable. Children tackle this task differently at different developmental ages.

### ■ Ages and stages

#### **Infants**

Self-esteem for infants is nourished by attending to basic needs and building a sense of trust. When infants cry, they are telling you that they are hungry, sleepy, cold, wet, or lonely. The way you respond to those needs tells your baby a lot. Babies need to be held and cuddled. They need adults

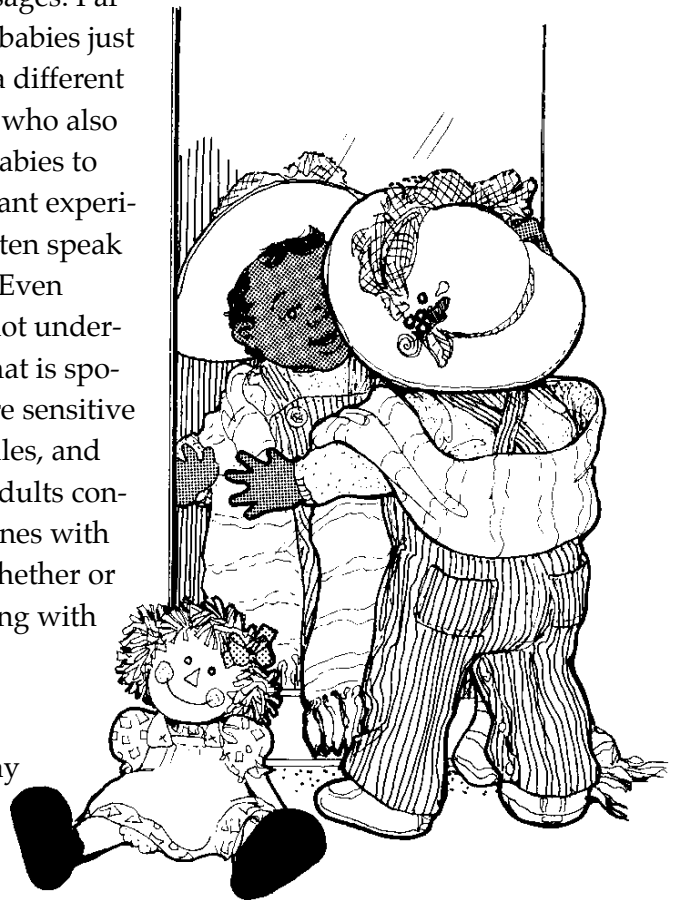
to talk, sing, and play with them. When basic needs are met, babies develop a strong sense of trust and security.

The manner in which needs are met also sends messages. Parents who feed their babies just to quiet them send a different message than those who also interact with their babies to make eating a pleasant experience. Our actions often speak louder than words. Even though infants cannot understand every word that is spoken to them, they are sensitive to tone of voice, smiles, and laughter. The way adults conduct everyday routines with infants tells them whether or not adults enjoy being with them.

#### **Toddlers**

The first step away from babyhood is a step toward independence.

Toddlers establish a sense of self by learning to do things for themselves and by touching, tasting, and feeling everything in sight (even when it is forbidden). At



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times this new-found independence can make a toddler seem a bit bossy. “No,” “Mine,” and “Me do it,” are favorite words.

Creating a safe environment and letting a toddler explore fosters this sense of independence. When Billy’s parents encourage him to help by pulling off socks or wiping the table (even if it takes longer), they are letting him develop important skills and a stronger sense of self.

## Preschoolers

Preschoolers sometimes seem grown-up. They can feed and dress themselves, they love to imitate adults, and they are eager to please. Self-esteem is tied significantly with learning new skills. As they develop from an energetic 3-year-old into a more competent

5-year-old, they begin to develop an awareness of their own personal interests and skills.

For example, most 3-year-olds are not critical of their art projects. They are more process oriented than product oriented. When they use play dough, they care more about the experience of squeezing, pounding, rolling, and squishing than what they actually produce.

On the other hand, 5-year-olds are much more aware of details and pay more attention to the work of other children. They learn by comparing their work to the world around them. As they strive to polish their drawing skills, it is not uncommon to hear them express a great deal of dissatisfaction. They want their drawing to look like a “real bird” or “real truck.” This dissatisfaction doesn’t necessarily mean that they have poor self-esteem. It just means that they are beginning to learn more about themselves and their personal skills.

## School-agers

As children enter school-age they are very optimistic about their abilities. Often, they also have very high expectations about doing well in school. Such a positive attitude is wonderful. It is helpful, however, to remember that young children have not had many opportunities to dis-

cover their strengths and weaknesses in an academic setting.

It is not uncommon for school-age children to set standards that are frustratingly high or low. Children this age have not had much experience in setting and achieving goals. Also, they do not have the capacity to measure their own strengths and weaknesses.

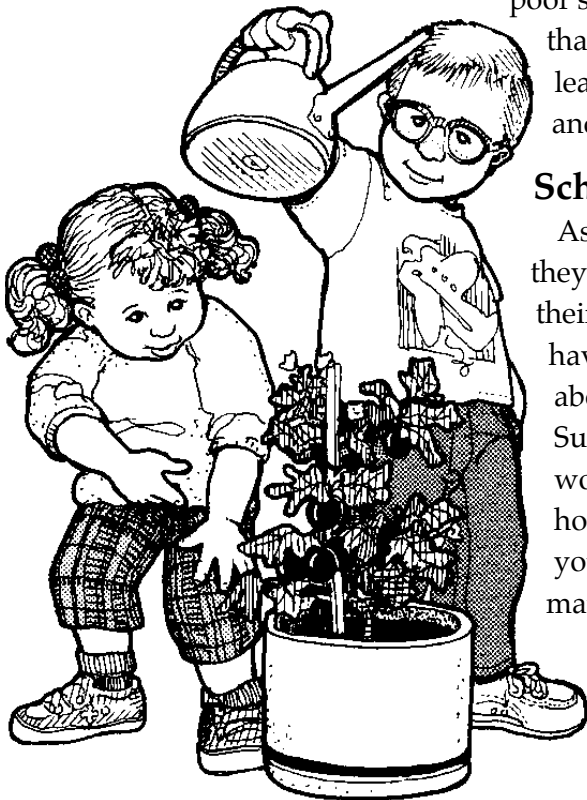
Adults can help by providing experiences that are challenging, yet achievable. Progressively learning new skills and becoming competent in those skills are sure ways to achieve a strong sense of identity and self-worth.

## ■ Tips for parents

### Help your child feel lovable and capable

The two key ingredients of self-esteem are feeling loved and capable. Billy’s parents can foster this in many little ways every day. It is important to Billy that they listen, take his feelings seriously, and spend time alone with him. You also can show your respect and support by allowing your child to make decisions, respecting your child’s possessions, and expressing love with words and hugs.

As children grow older, they begin to discover that they have special talents and interests. Parents can help by providing opportunities for children to



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experiment with different activities. Children who enjoy sports might be encouraged to try out a variety of activities such as soccer, basketball, softball, or swimming. An interest in music might lead to piano lessons or church choir. A nature buff might wish to join Scouts or 4-H. Remember, the focus is to explore a variety of interests. Try not to push or over-do any one thing at a particular time. Childhood should be a relaxed, stress-free time for discovery and experimentation.

### **One of your most important roles is as a teacher**

Billy's parents take time every day to teach him a new skill. Everyday life skills are so important. Billy learns how to set the table, to cook with Mom and Dad in the kitchen, and to spray and wash the car windows. Look carefully for your child's hidden talents and abilities and nurture them.

### **Be a coach more than a cheerleader**

A cheerleader just cheers. A coach uses praise to foster behavioral growth and to instill self-worth.

Happygrams, stickers, ribbons, and behavioral charts with smiley faces are fun to receive, but they often give children an incomplete message. A better approach

would be to use specific praise. For example, when your child sets the table, you might say "You did such a good job! You put the spoons and forks in the right place and remembered the napkins!" When you notice your child reading to a younger sister you might say, "When you growled you sounded just like a bear! It must be nice for Sara to have a brother who is such a good storyteller." Specific praise means more to a child than a brief "You are great" or a smiley face sticker.

### **Low self-esteem can be good sometimes**

It's OK for children to feel badly about themselves at times, especially when their actions make them feel ashamed or guilty. For example, if Billy steals a piece of candy from a store it is usually healthy for him to feel bad about himself. Feeling guilty can stimulate a child to make amends. Confessing,

returning the candy, paying for the candy, and resolving never to steal again can help bring Billy's feelings of self-worth back into balance.

### **Set a good example**

Taking responsibility for your own self-esteem is important too. Children learn so much by watching and imitating their parents. Talk out loud about your feelings and the ways that you cope with life's problems. For example, a comment such as, "I'm feeling sad today because someone at work said some mean things. I think I'll take a walk after dinner to feel better," shows a child that individuals can have control over how they feel and think about themselves.



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## ■ A final note

Positive self-esteem is possible for everyone, but it doesn't happen overnight. True self-worth is developed over a lifetime and most of us will experience many highs and lows as we journey through life. A parent's role is to help children feel loved and to teach them the skills they need to feel capable when faced with life's many challenges.



Written by Lesia Oesterreich, extension family life specialist. Edited by Carol Ouverson and Muktha Jost. Illustrated by Lonna Nachtigal. Graphic design by Valerie Dittmer King.

## ■ Children's books

*The Important Book*, Margaret Wise Brown  
*I Know What I Like*, N. Simon  
*Harold and the Purple Crayon*, David Johnson Liesk  
*Just the Thing for Geraldine*, Ellen Conford  
*Howie Helps Himself*, Joan Fassler  
*Ira Sleeps Over*, Bernard Waber  
*Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, Judith Viorst

## ■ Read more about it!

For more information about children and families contact your county extension office and request the following.

*Ages and Stages*, PM-1530a-i  
*Understanding Children: Disciplining your preschooler*, PM-1529b  
*Understanding Children: Disciplining your toddler*, PM-1529d  
*Growing up Fit: Preschoolers in motion*, PM-1359a  
*Growing into Middle Childhood: 5- to 8-year-olds*, PM-1174a

File: Family life 8

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