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Importance of Self-Esteem

'Self-esteem is the real magic wand that can form a child's future.' - Stephanie Marston

It is the single most important factor that determines whether children grow up to be happy and successful.

How is Self-Esteem Developed?

Children begin to mould their self-images at a very young age. Therefore, if we have positive, successful experiences when we are young, then we will develop high self-esteem. But few of us are lucky enough to have this experience. Our parents parented us as they were parented and, despite their best efforts, probably did not know how to best foster and build our self-image.

What is Self-Esteem?

So, how can we define self-esteem? It is a genuine feeling of self-happiness and satisfaction with oneself - a fundamental relationship with oneself. It is knowing that:

I'm OK just as I am - always.

It doesn't matter whether something we try is a failure, or we behave in a way which is not acceptable, or we say something we regret, or make a mistake. We are still okay. We can recognise that our behaviour needs changing, but the knowledge of our own worth remains intact. We have a sense of being **lovable** and **capable**.

Our self-esteem affects every area of our lives. Research has shown that self-esteem -

- is acquired, not inherited
- guides our thinking and behaviour
- affects our creativity, integrity, stability
- influences the type of friends we choose, our academic performance, all our relationships, the type of job we choose and our choice of partner.

Our self-esteem is formed through our relationship with those who are important in our lives. If people respond to us positively and we have all our needs met, if we are treated with respect and accepted unconditionally, then we believe that we are worthwhile. If this does not happen to us, then we develop low self-esteem.

Low Self-Esteem

According to Dr Louise Hart, low self-esteem comes from:

- rejection
- conditional love or no love at all
- lack of attention, being ignored
- emotional or physical neglect
- abusive touch

- comparison, perfectionism, always looking for what's wrong
- not being listened to
- put-downs, name-calling, ridicule, humiliation, judgement
- disrespect
- focusing on externals - appearances, performance, behaviour

When we experience this behaviour we form beliefs - 'I'm not good enough'; 'I'm not important'; 'I'm not okay'.

High Self-Esteem

On the other hand, there are behaviours which encourage high self-esteem:

- acceptance, respect, love
- attention
- honesty
- affectionate and appropriate touch
- having needs taken seriously and met
- honouring uniqueness
- being really listened to and understood
- having choices
- encouragement, support, appreciation
- high and reasonable expectations
- being given responsibility
- knowing there is meaning and a sense of purpose to your life

The more of these experiences we have, and the more often we have them, the higher will be our self-esteem. And when we come from this knowledge of our own self-worth, then we treat others with respect, which in turn raises their self-esteem. So everyone benefits.

As Dr Hart says, 'We make butterflies by feeding caterpillars, not by trying to paste wings on them'. So self-esteem is built by nurturing, valuing and accepting ourselves and others.

Identifying Children with Low Self-Esteem

Stanley Coopersmith, an American psychologist, has done a great deal of research in the area of self-esteem. As a result of this research he listed characteristics of those with low self-esteem. This information can be used by teachers and parents to identify those children whose self-esteem is low.

- **Fearful or timid**

Insecure about trying anything new or uncomfortable in social settings.

- **Bullying and bragging**

This often hides feelings of low self-worth under a tough exterior.

- **Unable to make decisions**

Cannot make up his mind, is very unsure of himself and doesn't want to commit.

- **Expects failure**

Perhaps because of failures in the past, or having had others do everything for her, this child says things like: 'I can't do that' or 'It's too hard'.

- **Reluctant to express opinions**

Seems uninterested in the world around him and appears to be very passive.

When children exhibit these characteristics, then we need to help them start to feel good about themselves so that, little by little, they can build their self-esteem.

Components of Self-Esteem

There are three components of self-esteem -

1. **The physical self**

This is how I feel about my body - its appearance and performance.

2. **The thinking self**

This is how I feel about my mind - what I know, how good I am at reading etc.

3. **The social self**

This is how I feel about myself and others - my relationships, inside and out of the home.

It is a combination of how we feel about all these aspects which enhances our self-esteem. We need positive experiences in all these areas - negative experiences in any aspect will diminish our self-worth.

We are Unique

Inherent in high self-esteem is respect and appreciation of ourselves - and our uniqueness. Once we have certain knowledge of this, we can accept and respect that others are also unique and entitled to their own opinions and points of view. We don't feel threatened when someone differs from us. We are better able to accept others for themselves without fear of losing our own sense of worth.

My Name is Special

- Objective**
- To understand that our names are special
 - To understand how we feel when others make fun of our names

- Duration**
- 30 minutes, plus homework

- Materials**
- A dictionary of names
 - A copy of the worksheet for each student

- Procedure**
1. Explain to students how to complete the worksheet.
 2. For homework, ask students to complete the worksheet. Some students may need to look up the meanings of their names during class time.

- Discussion**
1. Discuss students' answers to the questions on the worksheet. Emphasise that our names mean a lot to us and generally we are proud of our name.
 2. Discuss how people make fun of others' names.
 3. Why do you think they do this?
 4. How do you think it affects others when people make fun of their names?
 5. How does it affect you?

NAME:

My Name

1. What does your name mean?

2a. Do you like your name?

b. Why/Why not?

3. Who chose your name?

4. Why did this person choose this name for you?

5. Would you like to change your name?

6a. If yes, what would you call yourself?

b. Why?

7a. Has anyone ever teased you about your name?

b. If so, how did you feel?

c. How do you think the other person felt?

d. Why do you think she/he felt this way?
