

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1 Social and Emotional Development.....	7
Chapter 2 Physical Changes and Concerns.....	25
Chapter 3 The Importance of Friends	37
Chapter 4 The Home/School Connection	45
Chapter 5 The School Environment.....	57
Chapter 6 Intellectual Development.....	71
Chapter 7 Becoming an Independent Person.....	83

Chapter 1.

Social and Emotional Development

'I can't do anything right', Kerry wailed. 'Nobody likes me at school and my mum picks on me at home. I wish I was one of the popular kids.' Two minutes later she thought to herself, 'I'm glad I'm not as fat and ugly as that kid over there'!

Feeling secure and competent and popular and successful is one of the most important needs for young adolescents. Like Kerry, many kids feel one way one minute and completely the opposite the next. When they feel miserable or unpopular, they want to do anything to change the situation so that they become one of the popular ones. Unfortunately, sometimes their definitions of success and popularity are not the same as ours. The way they go about gaining self-confidence may not always be the best way to do it.

Some kids look to negative role models and attempt to emulate them. They may see a cool actor on TV who is doing all the wrong things and decide that's the way to feel successful. They may belittle someone else in an effort to build themselves up. They may feel more self-confident after they get away with something they shouldn't do.

Unlike most young adolescents, adults often have self-confidence which is fully developed in a positive and healthy way. When something goes wrong, they cope with the failure, learn from their mistakes and move forward. Not all adults have learnt how to do this well, and certainly most young teenagers haven't mastered it yet! This is what we hope will happen as they grow and mature.

One of the tasks of adolescence is to learn ways to develop self-confidence and keep one's self-esteem when things go wrong. Although these generally increase through the middle school years, teens may suffer dips in their self-esteem and have tremendous anxiety and stress over their looks, sexual development, schoolwork and friendships, etc.

Because having a positive self-concept is so important to happiness and security during these years, mood swings are often good indicators of the amount of self-esteem a child has at any given time. A 'bad mood' usually indicates a dip in self-confidence whereas a 'good mood' usually means that self-confidence is quite high. Self-esteem and self-confidence don't develop in a vacuum. Instead they are the result of a variety of influences and people in any adolescent's life. Three of the most important are:

- the child's own identity and self-awareness which develops rapidly between the ages of ten and fifteen
- the child's family
- other important people in the child's life.

Let's look at each of the above in more detail. The first has to do with an individual's personality. Some people are just naturally more sensitive or more highly strung or more easygoing or more worried or more laid back than others. This is part of our individuality, and part of the human condition.

An individual's personality develops from birth onward, but it generally emerges and solidifies in the crucial years between ten and fifteen. Some children just seem more naturally self-confident, while others really have to work on it.

Kids at this age become aware of their own shortcomings, and also of their own talents and abilities. Almost all will spend some time making unfavourable comparisons between themselves and others, but many will end up making an honest appraisal of their own strengths and weaknesses. This is the beginning of maturity and of being a truly self-confident individual.

Each child's family contributes to a child's self-esteem or lack thereof. Parents who continually point out all of the negatives about their child, or who have impossible expectations for success, will generally have a child with low self-esteem. Parents who point out the positives, and encourage and help their child work on areas of weakness, will usually have a child with high self-esteem.

This also depends on the ongoing relationship parents have with their children. Some kids are just more responsive to their parents than others. For some young adolescents, anything their parents say has to be wrong. As a parent, you are the adult! If you have a child with this kind of attitude, don't give up and don't buy into your child's negativity. Often this is just a facade for insecurity.

Because life's horizons generally broaden by age ten, people outside of the family unit have more and more influence on kids aged ten to fifteen.

Peer messages, spoken or unspoken, also become more and more important during the middle school years. Young teenagers gain self-esteem and self-confidence from their peer group. If the other kids think they are popular or beautiful, dumb or a nerd, this will affect how they view themselves. This is one of the reasons friendships are so important to most kids in this age group.

Other adults like teachers or coaches may become incredibly important. Self-esteem can be heightened greatly by just a word of encouragement from an admired adult.

Thus adults who interact with middle school kids can greatly influence how these kids feel about themselves; however, a word of caution is needed. Remember that self-confidence is not just the product of what other people are doing. It is also the result of one's own personality and attitude. If you have worked very hard with young teenagers and feel you have done nothing to change how they feel about themselves, it might be that their personality or self-awareness is getting in the way. Don't give up, but just remember that some kids are harder to reach than others.

It seems to me that many adults are looking for ways to help young adolescents develop emotionally and socially in a positive way. We want to help them gain confidence in themselves, but it's hard to know where to begin. Sometimes the task seems overwhelming! On the next page you will find some simple guidelines for doing this. Begin with one child. Start small and be sincere. You will be amazed and pleased with the results!

A Step-by-Step Process for Building Self-Confidence in Children Aged 10-15

1. Look for something the child has done well—find something specific. This works better than making general statements about how well they are doing.
2. Show your approval both verbally and non-verbally. Smiles, applause and a 'high five' can convey as much as words.
3. Describe the positive aspects of what you have observed. Make sure to use positive words not negative ones. (For example, 'It was wonderful that you sat so quietly during the entire lecture', rather than 'Thank you for not being noisy'.)
4. Use external rewards as appropriate. Find out what the teenager in your life would like as a special treat or a special thing to do.
5. Help the child learn to reward him/herself when something is done well. Self-motivation leads to internal motivation (For example students who reward themselves with half an hour of listening to their favourite music after successfully completing a difficult homework assignment).
6. Praise persistence and effort rather than ability and intelligence. Point out the results of working hard. Encourage sticking to a hard task. Show the relationships between actions and outcomes.
7. When you observe them being used, point out the value and positive results of good social skills, such as:
 - listening to others
 - good manners
 - taking turns
 - developing a sense of humour
 - using appropriate language
 - accepting and appreciating differences.