

Positive Parenting of Primary Schoolers

Self-Esteem

As children grow up they form views of themselves as a person, their value as an individual and how good they are at doing things. This view of their self-worth is called self-esteem. An important part of being a parent involves encouraging children to be confident and develop healthy self-esteem. This means children having a true sense of their strengths and weaknesses. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you promote your child's self-esteem.

Why Is Self-Esteem Important?

Children who have high self-esteem are happier, more cooperative, more successful at school and make friends more easily. They are fun to be with because they enjoy challenges, are eager to learn and enjoy success. They also cope with stress more effectively and are less likely to develop behavioural and emotional problems.

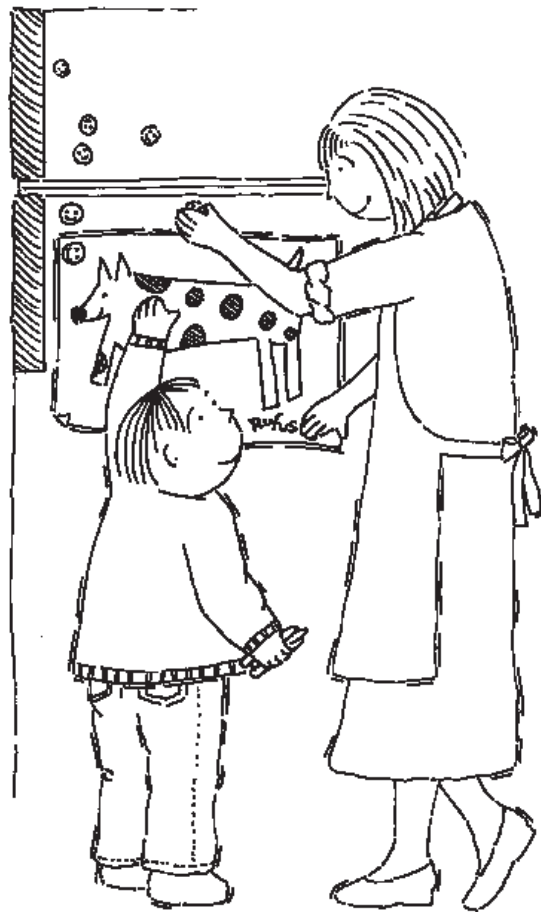
Children with low self-esteem often feel inadequate, are reluctant to try new things and give up easily. They have few goals and rarely achieve them, and they often let others take advantage of them. They are also more likely to become anxious, unhappy or depressed.

What Causes Low Self-Esteem?

Low self-esteem is caused by children thinking and believing bad things about themselves. This negative 'self-talk' is often untrue. For example, a child may tell themselves they are dumb, ugly, stupid, naughty, mean, selfish or a bad person.

Children can develop critical and destructive ways of thinking about themselves because of experiences within the family. Things that can contribute to low self-esteem in children include:

- Lack of praise, affection or attention.
- Not recognising the child's achievements.
- Lack of limits and discipline.
- Hurtful, blaming and critical comments or actions.
- Unfavourable comparisons with brothers and sisters.
- Physical or emotional abuse.
- Lack of encouragement for self-care and hygiene.
- Lack of regular exercise and fitness.
- Frequent arguments and conflict between parents.



How to Encourage Healthy Self-Esteem

Praise Your Child

Children who receive plenty of praise and encouragement feel good about themselves. Talk about the things your child does well, rather than criticise their weaknesses. If you need to talk about weaknesses, make sure you talk about strengths first, say something like—*Ben, you're doing really well at bowling, but we might need to spend some time practising your batting.*

It is important to focus on your child's efforts rather than just the final result. If you only praise outstanding results, your child may feel that just being themselves and doing their best is not good enough. Praise your child for trying, and making improvements, and they will be more motivated to continue trying at a difficult task. Successful results may take a while to achieve and children may give up if their efforts are not recognised along the way.

Tell Your Child You Care

Tell your child you love them. Children need to be told often that they are valued and cared for. Spending time

with your child, and being available when they need you, will also make your child feel worthwhile and let them know that you value them as a person.

Look for Your Child's Good Points

Avoid name calling and put downs. If your child hears often enough that they are lazy or stupid, they will start to believe these comments and act accordingly. Encourage your child to think of what they do well and what they like about themselves. Let them know they do not have to be the same as everyone else—that it is okay to be different and be good at different things.

Encourage a Healthy Lifestyle

Encourage good hygiene, grooming and regular exercise to help your child feel good about themselves.

Teach Your Child To Be a Good Friend

Children who like themselves find it easier to like other people, and children who feel liked by others will have higher self-esteem. Encourage your child to make friends. If your child is shy and finds it hard to make friends, practise how to approach another child and start talking or ask if they would like to play. Encourage your child to bring friends home to play.

Encourage Your Child To Set Goals

Help your child set some goals that are easy to achieve. Make sure your child's goals do not involve perfection or expectations that are too high. When your child shows initiative and ambition by making plans, such as opening a bank account or saving for something they really want, be supportive. Offer constructive suggestions and encouraging comments, not criticisms. Help them get started by breaking the goals into smaller steps or a plan of action.

Encourage Your Child's Independence

Show confidence in your child's abilities by letting your child do things for themselves as soon as they are ready. By doing things for themselves, children learn what they can do and that they can control their world. Allowing your child to take reasonable risks also lets them know that you believe in them. Encourage your child to take on new tasks, such as chores around the home, to help them develop a sense of responsibility.

Encourage Your Child To Evaluate Their Own Achievements

Ask your child for their opinions about what they have accomplished. For example, if your child proudly shows you a painting they have produced, ask them to tell you about it and to let you know how they feel about it.

Tell your child that it is okay to make mistakes and that this is how we learn to do things better. Help your child to

work out how to fix their own mistakes, rather than taking control yourself.

To encourage your child to feel good about their accomplishments, prompt them to give themselves some praise for their efforts. For example, say something like—*You got a B- for your last social studies project and A+ for this one. What do you think about that Roberto?*

Encourage Your Child To Express Their Ideas

Children need to learn to express themselves appropriately. Listen to your child's ideas, feelings, thoughts and hopes. Summarise what they have said and ask questions to help them develop their own opinion. This does not mean tolerating rude or unacceptable behaviour.

Encourage Laughter

Laughter is a great emotional release. Children who feel good about themselves laugh spontaneously, develop a sense of humour and learn to tell funny stories. Encourage this skill by listening to your child's stories, playing games and having fun together.

Let Your Child Make Decisions

Encourage your child to do things they like to do. Avoid pushing your child into things that you would like them to do. If parents impose their opinion too strongly, children can feel pressured into choices, such as playing a particular sport or musical instrument. Follow and encourage your child's interests and talents. Where appropriate, let them make decisions for themselves. Involve your child in family decision making, such as the negotiation of house rules.

How To Manage Your Child's Negative Self-Talk

Talk About Making Mistakes

Let your child know that making mistakes or failing at times does not make them a complete failure. Talk about things that you are finding difficult or feel you did not do well. Admit your own failures and frustrations and talk about what you did or plan to do to make the situation better. If you are anxious about a big event, talk about your feelings with your child. By your example, your child will learn that taking risks means failure is possible, and that no one can be good at everything.

Help Your Child Deal with Disappointment

Many children put themselves down occasionally. When a child says things like—*I'm dumb, you hate me, or I'm stupid*—sometimes this is a reaction to being disappointed

or not getting their own way, such as not being chosen for a team. Coping with and bouncing back from set-backs and disappointments is part of life. Encourage your child to enjoy an activity or game even if they are not the winner, or to try again after a set-back. Rather than simply reassuring your child that everything is alright, let your child know that you understand their feelings and help them work out a way of dealing with the situation.

Help Your Child Cope with Their Feelings

Sometimes when children are upset they need a little extra attention and support. Finding something you can do together for a short while will distract your child from feeling miserable.

Be Supportive but Avoid Overreacting

When your child expresses strong negative feelings about themselves, avoid becoming overly sympathetic. Children can easily learn that criticising themselves gets attention. Try to teach them to think more realistically. For example, if your child says that they think they are not as good as the other children at school, help them to think of more helpful things to say to themselves—*I might not be the best in the class at maths, but I'm good at spelling and drawing or I'll ask for some help from the teacher if I get stuck.*

Give Your Child Accurate Information

When children are upset about something due to having misunderstood a situation, tell them what actually happened. For example, if a child is upset and blames themselves for the death of a pet, explain the true situation—*Michelle, I know you're upset about Booma dying, but he was very old and sick. It's nobody's fault that he passed away.*

Help Your Child Be Optimistic

Talk to your child in a positive, optimistic way about future challenges, jobs, tasks or responsibilities. Avoid dwelling on negative past experiences.

How To Help Your Child Solve Problems

Show Your Child How You Solve Problems

Children learn a lot through watching others. Be a good role model. Let your child see how you deal with problems. Talk to them about how a problem can be broken down into smaller parts that can be worked out one at a time.

Involve Your Child in Family Problem Solving Meetings

Call a family meeting to discuss an issue. Start with a problem that is easily solved, for example where to have

the next family holiday. Encourage your child to participate in problem solving. When they express an opinion about a possible solution to the problem, use encouraging comments such as—*Nathan, that's a good idea!* or *Yes that's one possibility Isabella. Can you think of any more?*

Teach Your Child the Problem Solving Steps

The steps in problem solving are as follows :

- State the problem clearly.
- Come up with some possible solutions ('brain storm').
- Choose the best solution.
- Try out the solution.
- Evaluate the outcome—did the solution work?

Prompt Your Child To Solve Their Own Problems

Encourage your child to take responsibility for solving their problems. When your child has a problem, such as completing an assignment or having an argument with a friend, rather than telling your child what to do, prompt your child to use the problem solving steps. Say something like—*John, I know this is important to you, but I can't solve the problem for you. Let's do some brain storming and see what we can come up with.* Ask your child to choose the best solution—*Now Janine, what are you going to say if Julia tries to copy your work in class today?*

Points to Remember

Low self-esteem can also be a sign of more serious emotional problems such as depression. If your child has been sad or miserable for a long time, your child may be depressed. Consider seeking professional advice.

Key Steps

- Praise your child's efforts and achievements.
- Tell your child you care.
- Look for your child's good points.
- Help your child make friends.
- Encourage your child to set goals, do things for themselves and evaluate their own achievements.
- Encourage your child to express their ideas and make decisions.
- Help your child manage their feelings and be optimistic.
- Teach your child to solve problems for themselves.

See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.



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