

Fostering Children's Self-Esteem

by Stephen Green, Ph.D.

Self-Esteem: Defining the Concept

Helping children develop a healthy self-esteem is frequently mentioned by educators as an important goal of early childhood education. It is commonly thought that if parents and other significant caregivers can bolster children's self-esteem at a young age, they will be more likely to successfully navigate the challenges of life. While this may be true, efforts to understand the nature and role of self-esteem in children's development have been hampered by confusion over what is meant by the concept (Katz, 1995; Reasoner, 2006).

Some define self-esteem as simply having "good feelings" about oneself. Others contend that self-esteem goes beyond feelings and includes cognitive (thoughts about oneself), affective (feelings or emotions about oneself), and behavioral (e.g., resilience, being decisive and respectful of others) elements (Reasoner, 2006). Dr. Lilian Katz, an international leader in early childhood education and past president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), has written extensively on the need to distinguish between self-esteem and narcissism, which is an excessive preoccupation with oneself (Katz, 1993). She



believes that many of the "trivial" practices that educators use to build a child's self-esteem (e.g., having children complete the sentence, "I am special because...") actually engender self-preoccupation rather than an accurate sense of competence and self-worth.

The term "self-esteem" was first coined by American psychologist and philosopher William James in 1890. He viewed self-esteem as resulting from the ratio of an individual's successes in important areas of life divided by the individual's failures in the same areas. Critics, however, argue that this is too narrow a view. Many researchers, educators, and practitioners over the years have attempted to better define the concept. Today, the most widely accepted definition comes from Dr. Nathaniel Branden, a psychotherapist who has published numerous articles and books on the subject of self-esteem. Dr. Branden defines self-esteem as "**the experience of being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness.**" He contends that self-esteem is composed of two components:

1. Self-efficacy – confidence in one's ability to think, learn, choose, and make appropriate decisions; and
2. Self-respect – confidence in one's right to be happy and in the belief that achievement, success, friendship, respect, love, and fulfillment are appropriate to us (Branden, 2006).

It is important for child care professionals to operate from a common definition of self-esteem, and to have an accurate understanding of the concept so that practical steps can be taken to foster children's self-esteem.

Healthy Self-Esteem vs. Unhealthy Self-Esteem

When considering the concept of self-esteem, it is helpful to distinguish between healthy (authentic) self-esteem and unhealthy (pseudo) self-esteem. Robert Reasoner, from the National Association for Self-Esteem, stresses the importance of having both a sense of personal worth and competence. He argues that there must be a balance between the two to have a healthy self-esteem. In his article, *The True Meaning of Self-Esteem*, Reasoner writes,

A sense of personal worth without competence is just as limiting as competence without worthiness. A strong sense of worthiness prevents competence from becoming arrogance by keeping the individual focused on basic values, and competence prevents worthiness from becoming narcissism by requiring good feelings to be earned, not given. Thus, behaviors that might be described as egotistic, egocentric, conceited, boasting or bragging, bullying, taking advantage of, or harming others are defensive behaviors indicative of a lack of self-esteem. Such behaviors, therefore, should not be confused with authentic, healthy self-esteem (Reasoner, 2006).

In distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy self-esteem, Katz (1993) states, "Healthy self-esteem refers to realistic and accurate positive appraisals of the self on significant criteria across a variety of interpersonal situations. It also includes the ability to cope with the inevitability of some negative feedback. By contrast, unhealthy self-esteem, as in

narcissism, refers to insensitivity to others, with excessive preoccupation with the self and one's own image and appearance in the eyes of others."

In other words, children with a healthy self-esteem place value on

themselves that is both positive, and at the same time, realistic. Children with a healthy self-esteem are also able to handle a reasonable amount of negative experience/information. For example, a child who is corrected by his caregiver for misspelling his name does not consider himself a total failure. Instead, he continues to try spelling his name until he succeeds.

For very young children, self-esteem is based primarily on feelings of being loved, accepted, and valued by parents and other significant caregivers. As children age, self-esteem also becomes a product of feelings derived from evaluating oneself against some external criteria (e.g., school performance; physical attractiveness) (Katz, 1993).



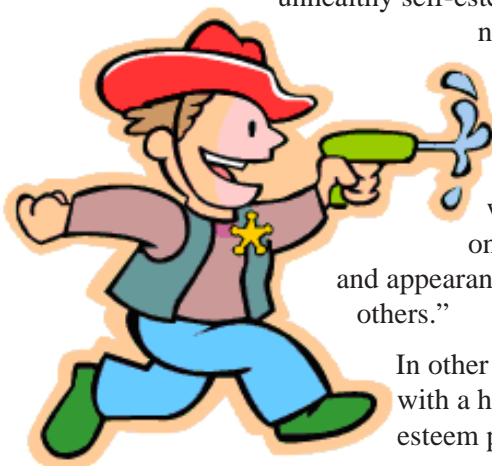
Researchers have discovered that there is a noticeable difference in the characteristics of children with healthy self-esteem and those with unhealthy self-esteem. For the most part, children with a healthy self-esteem tend to be happier, more confident, and less afraid of failure. These children tend to take more risks, and when they do fail at a task, they tend to bounce back and try again. Children with an unhealthy (low) self-esteem, on the other hand, tend to be less confident, dissatisfied with themselves, and have a greater fear of failure. A child with an unhealthy self-esteem may say things such as:

- "I can't do anything right."
- "I know I can't do it."
- "I know I'll fail."
- "I wish I were someone else."

Strategies for Fostering Children's Self-Esteem

As a child care provider, you are uniquely positioned to influence and shape children's views of themselves. The time that you spend with the children and the nature of your interactions with them enable you to instill in them a sense of personal worth and competence. Following are some practical strategies for building a child's self-esteem.

- **Lay the groundwork when children are young.** The foundation for a healthy self-esteem is laid very early in a child's life. In fact, self-esteem begins to develop the day children are born, as attachments are formed with parents and other adults who are responsible for their care. By loving and properly caring for infants, trust is established. This trust serves as the foundation for a



healthy self-esteem. For very young children, self-esteem is based on feelings of being loved, accepted, and valued. Some basic actions that you can take to foster a healthy self-esteem within infants and toddlers include talking to them, singing to them, reading to them, holding them, and responding readily to their cries and smiles. When you do these things, you communicate a strong message to the children that you care for them and value them for who they are.

- **Recognize the influence of children's peer groups.**

When children are very young (i.e., infants and toddlers), they look almost exclusively to adults for guidance and support. As children grow older, however, their peers take on an increasingly important role. Children tend to be very sensitive about what their peers think of them (e.g., how they dress, their physical appearance, their interests, etc.), and for better or worse, children are not always tactful when addressing their peers. Teasing related to the above topics is commonplace among children. While some amount of teasing is unavoidable, and even harmless, you can help reduce the negative effects of teasing on children's self-esteem by helping children understand that no one likes to be made fun of. At the same time, you have an opportunity to teach children that their view of themselves should not be shaped entirely by outside forces. Help them understand that authentic self-esteem (i.e., self-worth and competence) is not dependent on one's clothing, money, material possessions, or physical characteristics.



- **Respond to children's interests and efforts with appreciation rather than just praise.** Children, like adults, thrive on the encouragement and support they receive from individuals who are important to them. However, it is possible, in our desire to promote children's self-confidence, to go overboard with praise that is devoid of meaning. Rather than lavishing children with empty flattery and praise, Katz (1995) suggests that a better approach is for adults to respond positively to children's interests and efforts. This can be done by acknowledging children's unique interests in a particular topic (e.g., animals, sports), helping them pursue their interests by finding out more information on a particular topic, and by treating their interests seriously.

- **Engage children in tasks and activities that offer children a real challenge.** To maintain motivation and persistence, researchers have found that children need to successfully negotiate learning tasks most of the time. This means that the activities that you provide for children should be within their range of abilities. Consistently asking children to complete tasks that are beyond their understanding and abilities will lead to frustration and repeated failures, which can have a negative impact on children's motivation and self-image. At the same time, engaging children in activities that are too easy, or require little or no effort on their part, can hinder their ability to move to the next level. Therefore, it is important to involve children in a wide variety of activities that not only allow them to practice newly acquired skills, but also challenge them to move just beyond their current level of mastery (Bredenkamp and Copple, 1997). When children successfully complete challenging tasks, it leads to a sense of accomplishment.



- **Help children cope with occasional negative feedback and frustrations.** As important as it is for children to experience success, it is equally important for them to learn how to cope with occasional negative feedback and frustrations (Katz, 1993, 1995). You can help children in this regard by communicating with them that success on every occasion is not possible, and that we all experience disappointing moments in our lives when we don't perform our best. Sharing examples from your own childhood can help children understand that what they experience at times is entirely normal. For example, if you had trouble in a particular subject in school, you could talk about your struggles and how you overcame them. You can also help children cope with negative feedback from their peers. When children's peers do and say things that make them feel unaccepted or even disliked, you can reassure them that you support and accept them even when others do not.
- **Avoid excessive and harsh criticism.** Children need to be esteemed by parents and primary caregivers. It is important for them to perceive that you value and respect them for who they are. At the same time, children need to be corrected when they engage in behavior that is inappropriate. Some level of constructive criticism is necessary to correct children

and motivate them to do their best. For example, a child who purposefully puts no effort into a group project should not be praised for his contributions to the group. Instead, he should be told that he has a responsibility to put in his best effort to help the group complete the project. Criticism, however, no longer becomes constructive when it is excessive or overly harsh. Avoid criticism that takes the form of ridicule or shame. Calling children names (e.g., lazy, incompetent, stupid, etc.), yelling at them in front of other children, or implying that they are failures can have a devastating impact on children's self-esteem (Nuttall, 1991).

- Model for children a healthy (authentic) self-esteem.** Children are highly influenced by the example you set for them. As an influential person in their lives, they look up to you and will imitate the behaviors they see from you. Therefore, it is important for you to apply the concepts in your own life that you are trying to teach them. If you want children to develop a healthy self-esteem, you must model these qualities for them on a regular basis. Demonstrate for them the qualities that are characteristic of an authentic self-esteem. Teach children that you can be confident in your abilities and still maintain a humble attitude. Show them that you can be competent despite occasional failures. Demonstrate for them that your self-worth is not entirely dependent outside forces (e.g., what others think about you). Finally, teach them through your example that a healthy self-esteem also means that you consider the feelings of others to be as important as your own.



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- Reasoner, R. (2006). *The True Meaning of Self-Esteem*. National Association for Self-Esteem. Available at <http://www.self-esteem-nase.org/>.

Helpful Websites

- Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting, *Distinctions between Self-Esteem and Narcissism: Implications for Practice* by Lilian G. Katz
<http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/eeearchive/books/selfe.html>
- National Association for Self-Esteem
<http://www.self-esteem-nase.org/>
- National Network for Child Care (NNCC), *Self-Esteem and Children* by Paul Nuttall
<http://www.nncc.org>
- The Official Website of Nathaniel Branden,
<http://www.nathanielbranden.com>
- The Ohio State University Extension Fact Sheet; State 4-H Office, *Building Self-Esteem* by Bob Cripe
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/4h-fact/0008.html>
- The Ohio State University Extension Fact Sheet; Family & Consumer Sciences, *Building Children's Self-Esteem* by Jan Gordon
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hy-gfact/5000/5263.html>