

From The Inside Out

4 Steps to Helping Children (& Adults) Build *Healthy* Self-Esteem

Much has been written on the subject of self-esteem – particularly as it pertains to children – over the last four-plus decades. A great deal of it has been valuable, some of it controversial, and most of it has in the very least contributed to a heightened awareness of the importance of a positive self-image. Some claims have been made that self-esteem is actually *not* a good thing at all, with studies claiming to have shown that many people identified as bullies actually appear to have high self-esteem - even criminals and some with severe personality disorders apparently have high self-esteem. This leads me to question our very interpretation of the term 'self-esteem'.

Having worked with children and parents on issues of self-esteem for many years – long enough to have watched generations of children grow up and become parents themselves – I have discovered that the term 'self-esteem' has many interpretations! One almost universal interpretation that has stayed with us since the self-esteem movement back in the 1970's has been that self-esteem is something that can be acquired through achievement, for example through going to a wilderness camp and mastering ropes courses while being highly encouraged and praised by others. While this is, of course, quite beneficial and can contribute to an enhanced sense of accomplishment, it hardly qualifies for *sustainable*, 'whole-person' self-esteem building.

I have briefly thought of looking for another term altogether, however, my Thesaurus tells me that the word 'esteem' is synonymous with 'regard', 'respect', 'honour' 'value', and 'appreciation'. So I have chosen to follow in the footsteps of those who just add the word 'healthy'.

In this interpretation, when a child (or adult) has what is considered to be *healthy* self-esteem, he feels confident and capable, worthy of love and respect – both giving and receiving -, and able to care about and contribute to his community and society as a whole in a constructive manner. Most important of all, he knows that he

has the resources within him to handle whatever life has to throw his way. These are qualities that are primarily derived from within, that are re-enforced and encouraged by achievements and strokes from others, but ultimately are developed from the inside out, - **not** from the outside in.

Step One to Building Healthy Self-Esteem; *Self-Awareness*

Learning to recognize and understand our own emotions is the first step to developing the ability for taking charge of those feelings and the behaviour and actions that they drive. Self-awareness, - knowing what we feel and why - and the ability to self-regulate, is essential if we are to manage life's stressors, pursue goals, have meaningful relationships and become contributing members of our communities, - all which give us the experience of positive feedback from our environment and a resulting *healthy* self-image. Sadly, so many of us spend far too much time looking to material things and immediate stimulation for our gratification and happiness, with 'stuff' and 'quick fixes'. The trouble with that is that we only want more, never completely satisfied or fulfilled, because we are placing our confidence in everything BUT our 'self'.

Step Two; *Managing Perception and Life Stress.*

One of the most difficult things for most of us to accept is that our perception determines our response to any given situation. It is difficult to accept because this concept makes us totally responsible for our own reactions and therefore for our own reality. Nevertheless, we *do* have a choice. We can choose how we perceive the events in our lives; a cup is either half full or half empty, depending on our perception. We can choose to take complete responsibility for our own actions and reactions and teach our children to do the same. We can help our and other children— both by guidance and by example – to understand the role ***perception*** plays in our lives before they become adults, and empower them to take charge of their own emotional responses. The results will be twofold; an increase in the ability to problem solve and think creatively; and relationships that are far more likely to provide positive feedback. Both of these will only further validate and support a healthy self-image.

Step Three; *Goals and Delayed Gratification;*

Whenever we attain a goal, no matter how small, our confidence receives an important and frequently permanent boost. Although not the only ingredient, the achievement of goals is essential in the process of building healthy self-esteem. What can we do to support this?

First of all, develop the ability for delayed gratification! Identifying a goal and having the ability to do what is necessary in order to reach that goal, usually involves some type of self-discipline and the ability to wait. Also known as impulse control, this ability cannot be over-estimated when it comes to goal achievement. If a child is accustomed to receiving most things she wants without any effort on her part, impulse-control will be a difficult if not impossible quality to develop – symptoms of which we are seeing more and more in our runaway ‘stuff-mart’ society.

The other element that is significant, and often under-estimated when it comes to attaining a goal, is the imagination. The way we imagine will determine the level of our success both in terms of clarifying the goal and in terms of staying focused on it. The younger children are when learning to use their imagination in a positive, constructive way, rather than as a fear-inducing tool, the simpler it will be to make it work for them. As they learn to focus their imagery skills to achieve what they want and help them be the way they want to be, their healthy self-esteem will organically develop.

Step Four. *Appreciation*

A strong healthy self-esteem is difficult to sustain without feelings of appreciation being present in some form; appreciation for all that is in our lives; appreciation for the people in our lives; appreciation for where we are; appreciation for who we are; appreciation for our efforts, for our achievements and for all that fulfills us; what has been coined as ‘the attitude of gratitude’.

In the last few decades, scientific studies have been carried out researching the power and significance of feelings such as appreciation. Strong connections have been made between the levels and frequencies of feelings of appreciation and our capacity for self-healing and the handling of stress. Some studies have shown that of all the feelings we experience, the feeling of appreciation has one of the most powerful effects on the body. Feelings of appreciation and other positive feelings

also help the frontal cortex (the part of the brain where creative thinking, and intellectual learning takes place) function better, helping us to self-regulate and behave more in line with the way *we want* to behave. This will ultimately result in us feeling good about ourselves – *giving us a positive, healthy self-esteem.*

Whether we take these four steps towards building healthy self-esteem or not, the most important thing to know about self-esteem is that when we seek to build it, what we actually are in search of is the unshakeable confidence - *self-confidence* - that comes *with knowing that we can handle whatever life has to offer.* And that seems to be more needed (and appropriate) now than ever!

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