

Building self-esteem

Esteem for all aspects of oneself is key to personal wellbeing, to good relationships, to finding a meaningful place in the world and to feeling compassion for all living things. It is a protective factor against the risk of abuse and the need for drugs, and it supports healthy living. It cannot be bought, but is something every child can have with the right care. This article is an introduction to what constitutes self esteem, and to how we can support respect for all the different aspects of the self.

Introduction

Synonyms for 'esteem' build a wonderful picture of what we are seeking for our children in building 'self-esteem' — regard, reverence, honour, approval, respect, appreciation — for themselves. Essential to this is a self acceptance, of our capacities, our appearance, and of who we are at our best. If we could just send all our children out into the world with such feelings of acceptance of themselves, what a different world it would be. This is the lofty aim in building self-esteem in our children, though we must begin in modest ways.

In the last thirty years the term self-esteem has been given a bad name because of the indiscriminate use of praise encouraged by some in the self-esteem movement. This was based on a misunderstanding about what children need in order to build a healthy respect for all parts of themselves. Children do need recognition for what they do well, when they try hard, and where they fail but try again. But when everything is praised, whether it is good or bad and whether the child made an effort or not, the child learns to distrust the opinion of the giver of the praise. Then the praise becomes worthless. Even worse than this, when the

praise is deserved, the child may not accept it as legitimate.

What the self-esteem movement did understand however, was that children need their feelings respected, and conscious parents today do respect the feelings and individuality of children more than has ever been done before. The twentieth century clearly brought more consciousness to our emotional lives, to being able to name and acknowledge feelings and to take more responsibility for them.

In building self-esteem, what is important is that all aspects of the child need to be acknowledged and respected. The child needs to learn respect and esteem for their own individuality, their thinking capacities, their feeling capacities and their capacity to work with strong will. Part of the respect for the will is what today is being called resilience, which in this context is a healthy respect for one's will power, one's ability to have the courage to try, to try again, to persevere, recover and learn from failure. Children also need to be able to accept and respect the physical body they have been given. So we are looking at building respect for children's individualities, for intellectual and emotional capacities, for their will and actions

and for their physical bodies. If all of these areas are not acknowledged, the child can be left vulnerable in the area where self respect and acceptance has not been developed.

In good self-esteem there also needs to be acceptance of limited ability in some areas, where the maximising of individual abilities is the goal, not an achievement of excellence or comparison with others of greater giftedness. It is unrealistic to expect a child who is not strong with abstract intellectual work, but is good with practical tasks, to be a theoretical physicist. Similarly it may not be realistic for a theoretical physicist to necessarily be good at being in a receptionist role, involving being skilled with

looking after other people's needs. Good self-esteem means valuing our abilities and accepting our limitations. What we do not want is self limitation based on lack of confidence and lack of self respect, rather than lack of ability.

The other aspect of accepting our limitations is the acceptance that we are not perfect (yet) but with awareness and commitment we can learn to change behaviours which are not always very noble in us! This is the work we do to transform our 'worst selves' into something closer to our 'best selves'. This too is about self empowerment and self respect and is part of building self-esteem.

Confidence and self-esteem: a clarification

There is one other misunderstanding about self-esteem which needs clarifying. People often think outward confidence is a sign of good self-esteem. Certainly people with good self-esteem are more confident, although this may show only as a quiet, solid, inward centredness not necessarily as an outward confidence. But confidence alone does not signify genuine self-esteem. Confidence can come from unrealistic self appraisal (as we see in some developmental ages when children think they can do more than they actually can, and do not want to be told otherwise). The outward brazen confidence we see in bullies can arise as a self protective behaviour, covering insecurities which are so deep and neurotic that their confidence often involves self-delusion.

We need to be clear that people with true self-esteem, that deep self respect and acceptance of ourselves for our individual self and our abilities, do not need to posture, to power-

monger, to bully, to boast, or to protect themselves against others with false personas and self-delusion. Any of these are signs of a lack of true self-esteem.

People with true self-esteem show acceptance, respect and love for others, and other people feel safe with them. They show empathy which leads to altruism, helpfulness, consideration and compassion. They do not exploit others. They have mutually enhancing relationships and are well liked. They are positive, optimistic and can turn mistakes into opportunities. They can persevere. They have inner discipline. They are open and real, can be themselves and don't have to hide. They can admit mistakes, weaknesses, failures and vulnerabilities. They are *inwardly* confident. They are powerful, but do not abuse power; rather, they empower others. They are not easily manipulated, but can be flexible when the need arises. In fact, they show all the signs of emotional intelligence.

How do we develop such qualities in our children?

In brief:

We can start by recognising that self-esteem consists of a healthy acknowledgement of and respect for the many parts of ourselves:

- **Our inner most self** and individuality which needs recognition, respect and unconditional love. Our best self.
- **Our thinking self** which thinks analytically, creatively, problem solves etc.
- **Our feeling self** and all those things which come from the heart, and are artistic, imaginative and creative.
- **Our doing self** which must also have the strength of will to act and persevere.
- **Our physical body**, that 'temple' in which these other parts of our self lives, and which we use to achieve our thinking, feeling and doing.
- **Our untransformed (worst) self** . The 'untransformed' parts of ourselves are those which cause difficulties to ourselves and others. Sometimes with children we can call our untransformed feelings our 'dragons' — our 'dragon of uncontrolled anger' for example. We need to acknowledge all these things for a healthy view of ourselves. We need to have the will to start transforming and taming our more difficult tendencies, yet also be forgiving of ourselves when we are not (yet) 'perfect'!

Building self-esteem in children – some suggestions

1. Recognise and affirm their individual self unconditionally

These strategies stress that the individual essential self needs unconditional recognition, acknowledgement and support. This is absolutely key in developing self-esteem. It is difficult to respect a self which is never truly seen and acknowledged by others. It cannot be stressed enough that such recognition is needed to feel truly valued. Everything else can fall away in life, one's thinking capacities, one's emotional stability, one's skills, one's physical appearance. The essential self is the only thing that cannot be touched by disabilities – by fate. It is what is left when all else has gone. The individual human spirit. It needs recognition and acknowledgement. Every individual in your life needs this of course – the check-out person, the garbage person, your child's teacher, your neighbour – such recognition is how we build healthy relationships with others. When unconditional love is added to the recognition as an individual then the child can feel truly affirmed as a person.

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Some ways to to affirm the individual self

Create a 'sacred time' (for each individual child) when you can be together on most days. Use this time to really 'meet and see' your child, and let them feel that they are seen, accepted and loved unconditionally. This can be short (5 minutes) but interruptions should be avoided. (eg turn off the phone). Bed times are good for this. You may simply share "What was special today?" You might also make longer times to do things that are special with each child alone sometimes. What is important is that you enjoy being with each other, not necessarily what is said or achieved.

To treat your children with respect and politeness is another powerful way to acknowledge your children. It recognises that they are important and special no matter how young they are. This also means being able to apologise to them when you were not respectful. Apologies can mend an unintentional or thoughtless hurt to this 'self'.

Express appreciation for their individual specialness and how much you value their presence in your life. Discourage comparisons with other children and instead emphasise that each child and age is special.

Affirm that it is OK to be different from other people and important to just be themselves. Let them feel that they can be themselves and individual in this family and that this family can be themselves and individual in the community. And that even different communities can be different from each other and that makes the world a richer place. In this way, being an individual is acknowledged and valued. Acceptance of one's eccentricity is one of the most freeing gifts one can have. This strength in their feeling individual is the key to avoiding peer pressures later. Some children and some developmental stages feel this need for acceptance as an individual far more strongly

than other stages. Be aware of these times in development and use them to strengthen your children's sense of themselves. There will be other stages when they may be tempted to be just like their peers. See the *Development profiles* for your age children.

Spend time doing things with your children. Ask them what they would like to do with you.

Tell your children often that you love them without it being conditional on something they have done. Let your words come from your heart, every time. Don't do it out of habit or it can become meaningless. Love can be expressed in many ways— by words, by an affectionate look, by touch, by actions, by spending time. As individuals we often respond to one of these ways more than others, and it is good to know what each of your children responds to most.

For example, children who need reassurance through touch will feel most loved when given plenty of loving touch, a hug, hold, cuddle, or stroke, but again, let these come from your heart while also respecting their feelings at that moment. However, remember that touch can be more invasive than other ways of communicating. Observe and respect their verbal and non-verbal reactions to your approach, and ask permission if necessary. Respect their right to say no.

With older children be aware of, and respect, that they may not want obvious expression of love in public! Leave it to them to approach you at such times. It is heart-warming to see adolescents returning from a school camp and warmly embrace their parents in front of everyone at pick up time. Trust that love wins out when respect is also given.

Some families develop their own 'signs' for an "I love you!" — a blown kiss, a loving wink. Whatever it is, remember it is your 'loving

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intention' that carries the love, not just the words, or actions or signs.

Separate your loving them from your approval of them. If your love depends on what they do, how they look, how they please you, it is not unconditional love. This does not mean we do

not try to help them become more responsible etc. Make sure your language reflects that the problem is the action not the person: "That was a *thoughtless thing* to do. I hope you will think more about it next time." Not "How could *you* be so stupid."

2. Recognise and affirm their thinking self.

There are many different ways of thinking, and our children need them all—head thinking, heart thinking and intuitive gut thinking. Our schooling systems generally concentrate on left brain, logical, intellectual thinking, but our world also needs right brain, creative, divergent, imaginative thinking. Encourage many ways of thinking in your children. These strategies encourage enrichment of thinking in the child and require some holding back on information and intellectual explanations while children are young to give them time to think for themselves, to imagine, contemplate and problem solve and come to their own conclusions.

Some ways we can develop good thinking

Work with how the children think naturally, developmentally. Thinking capacities take time to unfold, along with language, memory and consciousness and so should not be forced. Work with how children naturally think—they will show you if you listen to them. Give them time and encouragement to share their own thoughts about things.

Thinking in young children begins with the concrete world which they know, and with the here and now. Yet as their imaginations grow, they build their thoughts in quite observant and creative ways. In listening to their talk, appreciate their creative thinking and problem solving, rather than being concerned with absolute correctness of facts. If you feel you need to correct misinformation, do it gently, encouragingly.

Young children sometimes also ponder on more profound philosophical matters, like life, death, time and infinity but still in the context for what they know. "Did Grandpa have to climb a ladder to get into heaven?" One wonders what

prompts a five year old to speak of 'infinity' when one considers how little that word is used in everyday speech. They seem to be tapping into intuitive wisdom in this, along with what they already know. So the challenge is to extend their thinking but without making assumptions about their intellectual capacities, for we know most children, especially boys, need to be nearly seven before they are ready for intellectual work not based on concrete realities. Keep your own thinking alive, more pictorial and related to their world where you can. Try not to be dry and abstract with them, nor allow yourself to be made into a final source of information.

With young children discriminate between when interminable questions are requests for information or for your attention. Children sometimes use questions as a way of making you pay attention to them and give them your time. They may be wanting *you* not answers. This may be particularly so for more intellectually inclined parents who are more likely to reward questions with attention.

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Become a facilitator for thinking. Find the balance between you being the source of knowledge and skill and being the facilitator for learning. While it helps to build parental and adult authority when you have answers to children's questions (and you also have a lifetime of experience to add richness to what you tell them) there is also a danger that we disempower our children in giving them answers too readily. We need a balance between sharing our wisdom and empowering the thinking in our children.

We also need to encourage children to find their own solutions to questions and problems. It helps to refrain from immediate answers to questions. It helps to use leading questions. "What do you think?" and wait. Or "What can you see is happening there? Does it give you any clues?" "Can you think of anything that might help with that?"

Encourage children to see that they have the power to think things through or to change things themselves – and that you are there to help them explore how. In doing this you are empowering them, telling them that you believe they are capable of solving some of the problems they face. The more they do it, the more they will come to see themselves as competent and capable. They will also learn that solving problems is not something that we have to do alone. We can help each other. We can all have good ideas.

Encourage imagination and imaginative thinking. Very early in childhood, children start to use imaginative thinking in their games, with you, and with the objects they play with. The best way to encourage thinking in early childhood is in providing opportunities for free creative play, away from gadgets, screens and formal learning. Ideally such free play provides opportunities to create, build and problem solve, using open-ended materials, like those

that one can find in untamed spaces places such as sand and mud and bushy thickets, or in dress-ups, cubbies and their own play spaces. From this they may also learn to problem solve and to negotiate and work with other children.

As children grow older, healthy play can become even more complex and imaginative, with games that can extend through weekends and holidays, and take them into other environments, like camping in the outdoors, and which encourage creative thinking and initiative. Unfortunately much of this sort of free play has more and more in recent years been curtailed by screen time, parental fear and overly 'tamed' environments.

Thinking through language. Language is a key to concept development and thinking. Hearing and using language – through conversations and stories, nursery rhymes, poems, nonsense jingles which play with speech sounds, and songs, enriches thinking in early childhood.

As children get older, encourage storytelling and story writing. When children recall events and retell them as a story, it strengthens memory and more conscious speech. Encourage and give the children time to tell their stories, at the end of the day with you at bed time, at the dinner table with the family, when a child comes home from a party, a camp, an excursion. Get them to start at the beginning, and share their experience.

The written word enriches their familiarity with the grammatical structure of language and exposes them to far more sophisticated language. Read to them from when you sense they are ready for this. Enriching conversation is probably more appropriate for babies, and 'conversational looking at picture books together' more interesting for toddlers, but then one day they will be ready for the continuity of a real story.

Conscious Creative Courageous LIVING WITH CHILDREN

Then keep reading together as a family, even into adolescence, when holidays can be a great time for sharing great literature, like that of Tolkien, or humbler stories. The times on holiday, on a summer's day, when everyone should be out of the sun, offer a couple of hours for family reading. Stories help us to empathise by extending our experience into the imaginative world of myth and fantasy, into other people's experiences of life, of adventure and courage, as well as into history.

Higher order thinking and older children.

Our capacity to think is a gift of being human but it takes time to develop. It begins to unfold even in the young school age child with their new capacity for evaluation and to gradually become more objective. We can encourage divergent thinking and mental flexibility.

An extension of creative thinking is the encouragement of open ended thinking. Multiple choice questions discourage this sort of thinking, because there is always supposed to be only one right answer. A flexible thinker may often see the possibility that more than one answer might be right, so if you are frustrated by multiple choice, it may be a good sign you are creative, not ignorant!. Innovative companies today look for people who are capable of seeing many possibilities in a question.

As the school child's intellectual capacities unfold, they are even more capable of other sorts of creative thinking. Let them experience big picture thinking versus small detail thinking. Creative story writing, imaginative games (like "What if" ...), brainstorming for answers, mind mapping situations to get the whole picture before exploring the detail, Edward De Bono's techniques for extending our thinking—all these take a different approach to thinking than the traditional left brain problem solving approach.

Our complex world needs creative, flexible, divergent thinking and logical convergent thinking. Children at different ages tend towards different ways of thinking naturally; some a big picture ages, some small details, some broad, some deep. Encourage them to go with what they show you.

Encourage children to find their own answers and meaning. While accessing information from other people's sources (like books and the Internet) is certainly a useful skill to have, it should not replace the the gathering of information in everyday life.

Children need to learn to observe closely the phenomenon around them, to penetrate more deeply into the nature of things. Very young children do this naturally, so encourage them to go on doing this. As children get older, facts and information can be used to give context and provide a more thorough understanding of what they observe themselves. It should not replace their own observations.

This phenomenological approach to observation, to science and to learning, encourages thinking. Good teachers recognise that coming from what the children know for themselves is the best way to increase understanding of things beyond their experience.

Encourage problem solving. This can be on purely intellectual levels but also in being practical, like putting together 'make it yourself' kit or in social situations. Encourage your children to find solutions to problems they encounter, by asking "What would help?" be it in fixing a broken toy, or helping bring resolution to a conflict with a sibling, or working out how to make less mess in the kitchen when baking a cake. Help them to develop confidence in their own ability to think things through well.

Conscious Creative Courageous LIVING WITH CHILDREN

Affirm clear, logical thinking. As children come out of the more subjective thinking of the early school years help them to learn about rational thinking and objectivity. Help them to discriminate between logical argument and emotional statements, and to differentiate ourselves from our ideas. This prepares the way for rational debate, for dealing with confrontation/conflict, and extending, challenging and playing with ideas.

This also teaches flexibility in thinking, that “I can adjust or change an idea or opinion without it being a change or compromise of 'me'.” From Eleven years on children need such guidance in earnest, but it needs to be given diplomatically.

Encourage perspective taking. Being able to look at situations from different perspectives needs maturity and imagination but is very necessary for a tolerant society. Children need to understand that reality is complex and can be seen in many different ways. The more effort we make to appreciate and perceive reality, from different viewpoints, the more comprehensive our understanding will be. It takes effort and flexibility, but it helps us to understand and value broader truths. One cannot understand the the nature of an elephant by seeing only a glimpse of his tail.

Teach them to negotiate thoughtfully, to look at different points of view and to find compromises. This is an essential part of being able to take responsibility for themselves more and more as adolescents, as they negotiate freedoms, and other things for themselves within the family. It also teaches them to be more skilful in dealing with people out in the world in the future.

Teach them the value of conscious thinking and caring for ourselves so we can think well. Sleep deprivation is major reason for compromised thinking because it affects concentration and mental discipline. Learning to think before we speak or act can increase efficiency, avoid unnecessary strife, and increase our success in many things. They also need to know that just mental practice, thinking things through, can improve sports skills, for example.

A word about understanding. We are often in a great hurry to educate our children early, worried about them being left behind. But true understanding and knowledge cannot be hurried in its acquisition. Ideally it begins with wonder and awe, then becomes an interest in the world. Everything else follows from there. It all takes time. True knowledge comes from a deep place in ourselves as a result of integrating all that we have experienced and thought about.

3. Recognise and affirm their feeling self

These strategies stress that feelings are wise messengers to be listened carefully to. They also stress that we need to take responsibility for our feelings and we are empowered by this.

Some ways to affirm the wisdom in feelings

Be aware of children’s feelings and sensitivity. Young children are very sensitive and live largely through their feelings. Even their thinking is feeling-imbued thinking until eight or nine. Some developmental stages are also more sensitive and deeply feeling than others,

just as some temperaments are more feeling based and emotional. Know your child, their basic temperament and their developmental stages, to be more aware and supportive of this. Understand your child’s age better by reading the *Development profiles*. Sensitive children suffer

Conscious Creative Courageous LIVING WITH CHILDREN

and fear more because they feel and sense more; they need more understanding and protection.

Acknowledge your own and your children's feelings. As they get older, help them to recognise more subtle feelings in themselves by verbalising what you see in them. "You look frustrated!" "It sounds like you found that quite a surprise!" "You really love your doll, don't you!" "I can see that you trust her, I think that's very sensible." Similarly, it is useful to put into words what you are feeling so children can begin to learn what anger, surprise, love, frustration and joy look like. Or even more subtly, what apprehension, acceptance or optimism may look like.

Then try to help children find ways to relieve those feelings when needed. Encourage problem solving. Ask what would help? Empower children by teaching them that they can control how they express their feelings. They can learn that they can be "boss" of their feelings but also learn to respect their feelings as valuable messengers.

As children get older these lessons can become more sophisticated, dealing with increasingly adolescent and then adult problems. What does depression feel or look like? What can we do to help when a friend is feeling down? What do we ourselves need? What helps? Studies show that mental health education given in early adolescence significantly reduces instances of depression and anxiety through the rest of adolescence.

Recognise crying as a healthy release of feelings. Remember that tears "let the sadness out". In deep grief this is literally true for tears contain some of the chemicals released in deep grief. Be aware that some developmental stages find crying a relief, others stages less so. Let children cry but then identify what they need in

support. Boys cry too, although less than girls. Accept their tears.

Responsibility for feelings. Eventually when they are a little older they will understand that they are responsible for their own feelings. They can understand that our feelings are our own response to something and that we need to take responsibility for that. Other people do not make us feel that way (angry, sad even happy) but we respond that way to what other people do. Model this acceptance of the source for their feelings; say "I feel angry when you do this" not using blame with "You make me angry when you do this" This is actually very self-empowering because in doing this we are not becoming the victim of other people's behaviour. It recognises that we have a choice in the matter. We can say "No thanks. I don't need this." Of course such equanimity is not easy to find, but it is possible.

As children get older, they may begin to see patterns in their emotional responses. Or you may see them and point them out. "You often seem to get frustrated talking to her, why is that do you think?" "Have you noticed that you get irritated if I interrupt you, but it is most intense if you think I'll disapprove of what you're doing". These kinds of observations can lead to a much deeper understanding of themselves as well as highlighting the nature of their relationships to others. Remember however, that this must always be done with empathy and with the best interests of your teenager as the priority. Comments such as these made in anger do not tend to be helpful!

Never deny feelings. ("You can't be angry or sad about this!") Teach your children that feelings bring legitimate messages which we need to listen carefully to. Feelings can warn us when something is unsafe or unjust, or when something is wrong or confusing. What we do

Conscious Creative Courageous LIVING WITH CHILDREN

with our feelings is the challenge for us to meet. It is not okay to hurt others with our anger, but anger can help us recognise we have a problem and motivate us to do something towards solving it. If our anger is persistent we can give our anger something to do, something involving vigorous action might help, for example. If it is righteous anger, which tells us something needs to be done to correct a wrong, then it can move us into courageous action. Feelings can also tell us when we are safe and loved and free to be ourselves and let go. This too is very important for children – to be free of stress at least part of the time in this hurried world.

A Protective Behaviours guideline. “Feelings are important and can tell us what to do” needs to be a family guideline for protective behaviours and the prevention of sexual abuse. Feelings of fear or discomfort can be warning sign that someone has the intention to do us harm. Children need to know they have the right to feel safe. More on the importance of teaching young children to keep themselves feeling safe can be found in *Preventing sexual abuse in young children*. For older children look for the work of Freda Briggs.

Feelings are useful messengers but the messages can become corrupted. This is especially so with feelings of fear. Again we teach our children that they must listen to the feeling and then choose how to respond. However we also need to teach our children to discriminate between when fear warns us of a real threat and when it is not a reasonable threat in our circumstances. Generally a fear of finding a tiger under the bed is not a reasonable fear. But when a tiger has just escaped from the local zoo, the tiger under the bed may be a real possibility. With young children they may not yet be able to see the difference so we may have to treat any fear of the child as if it were a ‘real’ not an ‘imagined’ fear. Verbal reassurances that

there are no tigers under the bed may not help at all at times. Searching the room for tigers and finding none or a sign on the door which says “No tigers allowed!” may be far more reassuring for a three year old.

Adults need to be more discriminating in their fears too. Parents today are often overprotecting children out of unreasonable fear at the cost of children learning many things, including courage and resilience. The risk of child abduction by a stranger is minimal compared to the risk of denying children the experience of being more independent and learning about safety in order to be so. The risk of falling and injuring themselves seriously may be minimal compared with the risk of compromised physical development because of not being allowed to explore on more challenging play equipment or in free outside play. So listen to the fear, but then assess the risk the fear may be reminding you of, put sensible safety strategies in place and having done what you need to do, relax and trust that everything will be okay. This way, we are teaching our children about dealing with fear, safety, *and* having fun.

Respect the right to privacy and encourage children to find their own space when they need it. Encourage children to take the time to be with themselves alone, in quiet, to *meet* themselves, without the distractions of gadgets and screens and other people. Teach children to use ‘time out’ as a healthy way to ‘re-gather the self’ and find new equilibrium and not see it as punishment.

There is such a thing as ‘privacy deprivation syndrome’, characterised by headaches, irritability, tiredness—parents of young children might recognise this in themselves. Model care of yourself self by giving yourself periods of privacy, of peace, and your own ‘time out’. “Mummy just needs to sit in the hammock in

the garden by herself without talking for a few minutes.”

Dealing with confused feelings and learning to manage emotions. There are increasing levels of depression and anxiety amongst children today. Children also need to learn to deal with such negative feelings and the confusion and feelings of helplessness these cause.

Feelings can be particularly confusing when we have more than one feeling at once. “I love playing in the garden, but I’m scared of snakes” “I can’t wait to go to school tomorrow, but what if Tommy tells another scary story?” “I’m happy because I’m doing something I love, but I’m sad because my dog died only a week ago”. It can help in these situations to use a metaphor. For example, we can use the picture of each of us having a house inside us with many rooms. In each room we can keep a different feeling. When we spend time in one room we can feel one emotion, when we are in another room we can feel another. If we stand in the hallway with the doors open we can be tugged in both directions. So sometimes it is useful to shut one of the doors for a while. So that we can focus on

what we are doing now. To wait for a more appropriate time to feel the other emotion.

As children get older, we can add that when we feel bad emotions, to use our house metaphor again, we often want to leave that door shut all the time because it hurts to go inside. But if we never go back to visit, the emotion inside will eventually push open the door and overtake the house. Then it is very hard to give ourselves a break from it if we need to, so it is best to go back and spend time with that emotion in that room when you have time and are feeling strong. That way we can choose how long we spend there and can leave again if it gets too much for us to bear.

This is also a helpful metaphor for teenagers who are struggling emotionally for example if they get stuck in a single ‘room’ containing a bad emotion. Sometimes we forget that the other rooms are there. In those times we need our courage to go looking, to make an effort to leave the sad or angry room for a while and spend some time in a happier place. Not pretending that the sad room isn’t there, but just to give us the strength and the perspective we need to go back at some other time.

4. Recognise and affirm the doing self & the will

Two things are important in helping children develop esteem for their will and actions. Firstly we need to teach children to do enough different things that they have the confidence to ‘have a go’ at anything. That is, what we are aiming for is that they do not have to have particular skills as such, but have an overall belief in their general competence. Secondly, we need to make sure they have plenty of opportunities to learn courage, determination, resilience and confidence in their will or willpower.

Make time to teach everyday practical life skills to your children. Cooking, cleaning, building, gardening, nursing, sewing, organising. This is empowering in a ready made and specialised world. Take them camping

without electricity, fruit picking, bush walking, how to find what is wrong with something, and fix it.

Encourage your children to do those things they are capable of doing for themselves.

Offer support when needed but do not take over! (Use questions not directives!) Small children delight in helping so break tasks down into simpler 'do-able' components which they can manage safely. A toddler can cut a banana with a blunt knife, but perhaps not a carrot with a sharp one. School children can make their lunches when suitable food is laid out to choose from. Older children can change their beds and put the washing on. If not always, then at least sometimes.

Encourage your children to teach you things they have learnt which you don't know about. Let them be the authority.

Reward helpfulness, initiative, perseverance, and courage, as well as the development of new skills. Help them to see that failure can be a step on the road to success when one learns from it.

Provide opportunities for courage, independence and initiative, making mistakes and learning from them, to learn carefulness, responsibility and resilience. In our risk-averse world children are being deprived of opportunities to develop their physical skills, coordination and their will.

Teach them about safety, supervise them for a while to be sure they understand it well and

then trust them to do the right thing and leave them to it (in an age-appropriate way, of course) You can also teach them what to do if things do go wrong. This way they learn independence, initiative and courage and have the chance to practice it in age-appropriate ways. This way adult fears will not obstruct growth and the development of resilience and independence.

Teach your children to persevere, to be determined, to not give up quickly. At seven or eight years old they are tempted to blame failure and success on 'luck'. Watch for this. Tell them about the professional golfer who said "the more you practice the luckier you get." Tell them stories about individuals who built success on failure.

Let them see that individuals are empowered when they exert their will on the task, to initiate, organise, persevere, problem solve and carry it through to completion. Show them how you do that in your own life. Share stories about your failures and how you got around them, about how hard you had to work to learn something, like riding a unicycle. Learn something with them to support them through the hard start, like a musical instrument. (But if you find it harder than they do you will have to show determination!)

5. Recognise and affirm the physical self— the body

Encourage children to care for and take responsibility for their own bodily health - good food, sleep, clothing, exercise, stress management, respect for the need for care for themselves in illness etc.

Teach them to 'listen to, respect and take responsibility for their bodies messages', for example, tiredness or pain. Teach them ways to ease pain without just resorting to 'blocking' it with painkillers every time (e.g. massage, deep

breathing, do something about it before it becomes unbearable).

Teach them acceptance of the physical bodies they have been given. If we return to those synonyms for esteem in regard to the physical body—regard, reverence, honour, approval, respect, appreciation—it is clear that western culture today does not esteem our natural bodies as they are. If we did, there would not be so much bodily abuse through drugs, alcohol,

the need for make-up, face lifts and breast implants and the shaving of unwanted body hair; we would not stimulate ourselves with coffee and chocolate to keep us going through our tiredness due to our lack of sleep, and we would not heed the messages to soldier on through illness when our bodies are clearly begging us to stop and rest. If we could get our children to feel regard, reverence, respect and appreciation for their own physical bodies we would have less to worry about.

Avoiding addictions. The teaching of reverence, respect and care for the physical body through childhood *and* building other aspects of self-esteem is the most powerful thing you can do to protect your children's well-being in adolescence. It reduces the risks of their taking illicit drugs, smoking, getting drunk, having sexual intercourse at a very young age, having unprotected sex, cutting themselves or becoming anorexic. It is worth the commitment.

6. Acknowledging the good & the bad in the moral self

Any realistic view of ourselves needs to acknowledge that we are not yet perfect in our moral development or in our ability to take full responsibility for our actions as an individual. While we may be striving towards our highest moral potential, we still have some way to go to reach our ideals. Sometimes, at our worst we may fail rather miserably. So in young children's simplistic terminology we have good and bad in ourselves. With time, by middle childhood, children are able to observe, in a more discriminating way, these moral discrepancies in ourselves.

It is helpful to have some clear images of these two aspects of ourselves, if we are also to help children accept these parts of themselves and work with them.

Firstly we have our best, striving self, our 'shining self' perhaps. This is the most transformed part of ourselves, that part which is striving to be a loving human being, to be more conscious, responsible and free. This is where our conscience speaks most strongly. This is the best we can be, so far on our journey. This is the 'self' described earlier when we have good self-esteem. This is, simply, our *best self*.

On the other hand we also have our worst self, the 'scamp' in us. This is the most

untransformed part of ourselves, that part which causes difficulties to ourselves and others because it does things that even we don't entirely approve of, even when we would really like to do better. This is the part which blames, lies and denies rather than takes responsibility. This *worst self* does not care if our dragons of feeling rampage out of control.

So we live between these two, our best self and our worst self, moving sometimes towards the one and sometimes towards the other. It is useful to have such a way of talking about these things with our children, regarding both them and ourselves.

The children's story by Isabel Wyatt, *The Seven Year Old Wonder Book* (Dawne Leigh Publications, 1975) also provides some images for this. The little heroine Sylvie has on the one hand a friend called "Sister-in-the-bushes" who is Sylvie's small guardian and helper. She tries to keep Sylvie on the right path. She is Sylvie's *best self*. On the other hand there is "the black imp" who would try to lead her astray, with the little voice that rationalises and covers up and tries to persuade Sylvie to do something that her conscience does not approve of. The imp is her *worst self*.

In building self-esteem and a healthy sense of

Conscious Creative Courageous LIVING WITH CHILDREN

self, we need to acknowledge these different aspects of ourselves, the *best* and the *worst*, as part of what makes us striving human beings. We need to acknowledge it is important to improve our worst self and our more difficult tendencies, and strive to be our best self, yet also be forgiving of ourselves when we are not 'perfect'!

Naming the tendencies in the best shining self and the scamp, objectifies these parts of the self for the young child so that he or she can consider the behaviour in a different way and even give the 'scamp' a good telling off, which children love to do. The child takes in the message, but does not feel condemned. The

7. Some other useful approaches

Endeavour to be a model yourself of self acceptance, self love, self respect, courage and confidence, or at least make clear that that is what you would *wish* for your children and yourself and what you are working towards.

Try to recognise and take action when your children's needs are not being met and they are crying out for help and understanding through their misbehaviour. Are they needing protection? A sense of belonging? Love? Attention? A sense of power and control over their own lives? Look at possible feelings behind the behaviour – Fear? Anger? Sadness? What do they need? Are they stressed or over stimulated with too much going on? Understand their stage of development so you can meet their needs better. See the *Development profiles*.

Cut down on stress in your own and the child's life. Try not to hurry them in everyday life or in growing up. Give them time. Hurrying and stress batters their self-esteem. See *Foundations for healthy living*

sense of self stays intact.

All this may also help parents identify the positive qualities of your children and also accept the negative qualities which need working with. In times of stress and misbehaviour, it may also help parents to keep in their hearts a picture of the child's 'shining self' while still dealing with the more challenging behaviour of the 'scamp'.

It is also useful to look at how negative aspects of their behaviour in the 'scamp' might be transformed into positive qualities by the 'shining self'. So, for example, a child who expresses the need for power by bullying may be able to protect weaker ones against abuse.

Believe in your children. Offer them your trust. Be a trustworthy model.

Help your children to experience the consequences of their behaviour as a way of helping them take responsibility for it.

Avoid empty praise. They need honest feedback on what they can do better and acknowledgement when they do it well. However they will find the negative feedback easier to accept if it comes with an extra good dose of genuine positive feedback at the same time.

Separate the action from the person. Help them to understand that disapproval of their negative behaviour is not disapproval of themselves as people.

Ask whether activities are truly nourishing or merely entertaining.

Cultivate a sense of humour and have fun with your child. This releases stress.

Put value on them being active, creative and constructive. Passive activities such as screen

Conscious Creative Courageous LIVING WITH CHILDREN

time can waste precious opportunities for fulfilment from living and learning esteem for the self. The American Academy of Paediatrics recommends that there should be no screen time at all for Under Twos and then "total screen

time should be limited to one to two hours a day..." for older children. Some physicians fear even this amount may be too much and many recommend less screen time for preschoolers.' .

Conclusion

Building self-esteem in children is an ongoing task all through childhood. It takes mindfulness in the parent and also a certain amount of transforming of one's own scamps and dragons. Children learn most from your deeds not your words so here is a chance to give your own self-esteem a work over, to reject unhealthy messages you took on in your childhood and re-decide who you want to be, and then be that person. As my 96 year old mother once said, "Just because you are grown up and getting old it does not mean you can stop growing."

Further reading

Barbara Coloroso *Kids are worth it. Giving your child the gift of inner discipline.* (2002)

Other articles of interest on the website

Foundations for healthy living

Avoiding trouble series

Development profiles