

# SELF-ESTEEM

## Self-esteem? A definition.

The term 'self-esteem' is a term we always hear. What does it mean?

Self-esteem is an individual's judgment of himself or herself, a feeling of self-worth, and it forms the core of his or her personality. Self-esteem has a direct bearing on whether that child will make maximal use of his abilities and aptitudes. And we know from numerous research studies that self-esteem is not correlated with economic status, education or having a stay-at-home mom. It is, however, based on the ***quality of relationships between the child and those who play a significant role in his life.***" Dr Iris Chagwedera

... Self-esteem is the collection of beliefs or feelings we have about ourselves, our "self-perceptions." How we define ourselves influences our motivations, attitudes, and behaviors and affects our emotional adjustment."

## Where does self-esteem come from?

If we are to understand how to help a child with low self-esteem, we need to understand where it comes from.

Children are born without a sense of self and patterns of self-esteem start very early in life. For example, a toddler who reaches a milestone experiences a sense of accomplishment that bolsters self-esteem. The concept of success following persistence starts early. As kids try, fail, try again, fail again, and then finally succeed, they develop ideas about their own capabilities. At the same time, they're creating a self-concept based on interactions with other people – particularly those who play a significant role in their life.

Self-esteem involves feelings of capability combined with feelings of being loved. A child who is happy with an achievement but does not feel loved may eventually experience low self-esteem. Likewise, a child who feels loved but is hesitant about his or her own abilities can also end up with low self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem comes when the right balance is reached.

There are many theories concerning self-esteem and its development in children and a common thread is that **skill development** precedes self-esteem development and that all stages need to be worked through. If stages are skipped or not consolidated, problems occur.

## Common Barriers to development of a healthy self-esteem in children

1. Competition: the common school system in Zimbabwe of “hierarchy of grading and scoring” can contribute to poor self-esteem in those majority who are not acknowledged. Often in our system only the best performers get recognized, and generally it is within the narrow concepts of academics and sport (Sas Kirk).
2. A failure to see the child in a bigger context: a child is a part of a family, a tradition, a culture, a religion – not only a school or even a class and perhaps we forget the aim in education is not to get the child through your year but to prepare him for adulthood. There is the concept of a “holistic individual” that applies here.
3. Failure of a teacher to change expectations to suit the ability of the child. A common teaching practice is to ‘teach to the middle group’ forgetting that there is a group of children on either side who need perhaps more or different work.
4. The ability to differentiate between what is YOUR agenda and what is the child’s agenda: Critically examine the expectations you have for your child and ask yourself “**Why** do I have this expectation?” Is it based on **my** needs or **my child’s** needs? Be honest!’ and ‘Does my expectation **realistically fit this particular child at this stage of their development?**’ (Sas Kirk, Dr Chagwedera).
5. ‘Word messages’ that we send the children: Kids are very sensitive to parents’ and teacher’s words – and often they believe what you say when you say it. Children’s perceptions of their ability often can be related back to early negative or unrealistic comments on ability or output. Words have enormous power and can either shred or build self-esteem (Dr Chagwedera, Consultant Psychiatrist).
6. External expectations: Our children are exposed to, at a very early age, ‘acceptable’ expectations about perfection, attractiveness and ability via television, the internet and other forms of advertising. This can be very damaging to those children who do not fit into this narrow unrealistic and unnatural view.
7. Expectations that are too high: repeated failure is a natural destroyer of self-esteem. These expectations can be set by parents or teachers or a peer group. Expectations need to be achievable and relevant and thus it is important that you know the child’s strengths and weaknesses (Maggie Norton, St John’s).
8. We all have ‘emotional tanks’ which need to be filled. Children survive on acceptance, but they do not thrive on it. To thrive, to be the most they can be, **they need cherishing – that means feeling valued and precious and special just because they exist** (Dr Chagwedera).

## Signs of low self-esteem

Self-esteem fluctuates as kids grow. It's frequently changed and fine-tuned as it is affected by a child's experiences and new perceptions. Signs of low self-esteem could include:

- The child seems discouraged and reluctant to attend school.
- Your child often makes negative statements about himself or others: "I'm stupid," or "I'll never learn how to do this."
- Your child lacks enthusiasm for projects that would normally excite him.
- Shows reluctance to become involved in something new.
- Starts bullying behavior towards others.
- Has a tendency to blame others rather than owning responsibility for his behavior.
- Shown strong inability to cope with a failure or a low tolerance for frustration, giving up easily or waiting for somebody else to take over. He may offer excuses such as boredom or tiredness for lack of success.
- Kids with low self-esteem see temporary setbacks as permanent and a sense of pessimism predominates.
- Inappropriate behavior such as acting silly, tomfoolery or clowning.
- How children handle **making mistakes** is often clear indicator of low self-esteem.
- Children who are quickly discouraged and then engage in lots of negative self talk, show strong signs of low self-esteem.

## Consequences of low self-esteem

- It can affect **problem-solving skills**: children who feel defeated are less likely to ask for help and tend to retreat rather than respond to different ways of tackling a problem.
- It can affect **classroom performance**: underachievement in the classroom might be noticed or reluctance or inability to take on new challenges. Please note that **Learning difficulties** and low self-esteem often go hand in hand and parents and teachers owe it to the child to take special care around areas the child can excel in, rather than over concentrating on the difficulty.
- It can affect **social skills**: they often shy away from their peer group or conversely cave into peer pressure.
- It can affect **behaviour**: they can act out with inappropriate behaviours. It can lead to destructive behaviours like using drugs, pornography or vandalism
- There can be **physical repercussions** like depression or susceptibility to infections, or childhood obesity.
- The child may become dishonest as he tries to make himself appear better than he feels.

## What can you do to help in the classroom?

**Positive versus Negative reinforcement** – Praise and positive reinforcement are vital but remember to praise the child not only for a job well done, but also for effort. But be truthful – children can tell when you are insincere. *“Praising is a skill that requires study and practice. Every leader needs to get good at it. To get started, here are a few of the basic praise principles: praise must be specific, it must be immediate, it must be done in public and it must be sincere”* (Robin Sharma in ‘Leadership Wisdom.....’)

Reward **effort** and **completion** instead of outcome. Often the best way to deal with negative behaviour is **ignoring** it. Reacting to negative behaviour – whether positively or negatively is a reinforcer for that behaviour.

**Co-operation versus Competition** – Activities that encourage co-operation (or team work) rather than competition are especially helpful in fostering self-esteem. For example, mentoring programs in which an older child helps a younger one learn to read can do wonders for both kids.

**Encourage independence** – As stated before, early patterns of self-esteem develop as a result of accomplishment in basic self-care skills. Parents who do too much for their children hinder this. As they get older, independence still needs to be encouraged and developed. This is often fostered in ‘life skill’ activities and classes. ‘It is important to know that it is not just about telling someone with a low self-esteem that they are O.K., they have to ‘feel’ it – which comes from achieving small goals themselves.’ (Maggie Norton, St John’s)

**Allow task success** – Meeting children at their level is a vital component of building self-esteem. You cannot feel good about yourself if you cannot achieve at tasks. A good way to achieve this is to use ‘**curriculum differentiation.**’

- A differentiated curriculum is a program of activities that offers a variety of entry points for students who differ in abilities, knowledge and skills.
- ‘A program should strive for the optimal match between learner capacity and level of experience provided. Some children have greater facility with abstract thought, critical reasoning and meta-cognitive skills than others’ (Braggett et al.,1999).
- A curriculum needs to both challenge and stimulate students.
- Many (teachers) and parents may resent the idea of curriculum differentiation when it means that other students in class must do either more or less for the same grade. This is a difficult obstacle to overcome, as our culture focuses on comparison and competition when it comes to the educational system. The best solution to this is to provide families with detailed reasoning for curriculum differentiation while trying to shift the focus away from grades in the classroom.

**Watch your language** – Statements like ‘how can you be so stupid?’, ‘why do you always get it wrong?’ or ‘you really are terrible at maths’ etc. are damaging statements and should be completely avoided. Children believe these statements to be true and it is very hard to undo the damage it causes. Very often we are not aware of what we are saying, so you need to be conscious of your words.

**Don’t always have an ‘agenda’** - All too often lessons only have one goal, one answer and those children who think alternatively, or ‘out of the box’ are stifled in this environment.

**Allow choice** – Choice allows a feeling of being in control and can make all the difference in gaining co-operation. Children, especially younger children will choose an activity they feel they can achieve at.

**Teach skills, not tools** – Rote learning is a tool to pass your exams. Tools are methods to achieve a goal. Skills allow an individual to have the ability to adapt to a problem, to transfer abilities between activities and situations. Confucius said “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.”

### **The link between ‘creativity’ and self-esteem**

The following information is an extract from the book “Leadership Wisdom from the Monk who sold his Ferrari: the 8 Rituals of the Best Leaders” by Robin Sharma. Consider it in the context that teaching is being a ‘leader; and the role that you play in developing a child’s creativity and therefore, self-esteem.” ...’Do you really believe that everyone has the potential for genius within them?’

‘Genius is all about having an exceptional natural ability. We all have our special gifts and capacities. The problem is that most leaders have never offered their people opportunities to test and liberate those gifts. Rather than showing them what success looks like and then letting them use their creativity and resourcefulness to get there, the vast majority of leaders micromanage and dictate the path to be followed at every step of the way. They treat their team members as children, as if they are absolutely incapable of independent thought. Over time, this type of leadership stifles imagination, productivity and performance. ‘Leaders should lead as far as they can and then vanish,’ wrote H.G. Wells. ‘Their ashes should not choke the fire they have lit.’

‘So allow your people to flourish as they work toward your shared vision. Show them the truth about their talents and offer them blinding glimpses of a new world of opportunity. Challenge them and allow them to grow. Let them try new things and learn new skills. Let them fail from time to time, since failure is nothing more than learning how to win.... Understand that the visionary leader has the wisdom to push his people up rather than keep them down.’

## **Examples of programmes run in / schools to build self-esteem**

### **Junior Schools:**

Class Camps: Whitestone, for example, take their Grade 6 and 7 classes on camps which focus on team work. We have found that after these camps we see a noticeable difference in the children who have had to work hard to achieve. Their attitude and belief in themselves improves and we notice they progress more in class.

## **Summaries of current research**

### **The Effects of Family Functioning on Self-Esteem of Children**

Tam Cai Lian et al; *European Journal of Social Sciences – Volume 9, Number 4 (2009)*

Results showed that severity of conflict, social isolation and family cohesion have a great effect on the self-esteem of adolescents. Although family functioning correlated strongly with self-esteem, it is not the only contributory factor to its development in adolescent. Other contributory factors are peer support and achievement. Identifying an adolescent's sources of self-esteem is important to the self and is critical to improving self-esteem.

### **Can exercise improve self-esteem in children and young people? A systematic review of randomized controlled trials;**

E. Ekeland, F. Heian, K B Hagen; *British Journal of Sports Medicine 2005; 39:792-798*

The results, based on 25 comparisons with participants aged 3 – 20 years, indicate that exercise may be effective in improving self-esteem in children and young people, at least in the short term and for children and young people at risk. As exercise has no known negative effects, and many positive effects, on somatic health, it is an important instrument in improving children's health.

### **Low Self-Esteem During Adolescence Predicts Poor Health, Criminal Behaviour, and Limited Economic Prospects During Adulthood;**

K.H. Trzesniewski et al; *Developmental Psychology Vol. 42, No. 2, 381-390*

The aim of this study was to test the hypothesis that low self-esteem predicts negative real-world consequences. Adolescents with low self-esteem grew up to have more mental health problems during adulthood (depression, anxiety disorder, tobacco dependence); more physical health problems (cardiovascular problems, weight gain); more criminal convictions and fewer economic prospects during adulthood. Thus, it appears that self-esteem is more than simply a reflection of how things are progressing in one's life (e.g., Seligman, 1992) and may even have a causal force in determining future outcomes. The most reasonable conclusion is that low adolescent self-esteem is one of many potentially modifiable risk factors for a range of adult adjustment problems.

## **Childhood Obesity and Self-Esteem;**

Richard S. Strauss, MD; *PEDIATRICS Vol 105 No. 1 January 2000*

This data demonstrates a significant relationship between obesity and changes in self-esteem during early adolescence. Obese children with failing self-esteem are also more likely to engage in high-risk behaviours such as smoking and alcohol consumption. Jackson previously reported that low levels of self-esteem were correlated with initiation of tobacco and alcohol use among 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> grade students.

## **How can you nurture self-esteem?**

Accept me unconditionally, just as I am.

Don't try to make me into what you want me to be.

Accept me as an individual.

Appreciate my values and my way of thinking.

Do not belittle me or humiliate me in front of others.

If you label me in a negative way, it will have a negative effect on my opinion of myself.

If I hear comments that limit what I expect to achieve, I will eventually stop trying.

Give recognition and appreciation to all my endeavours – even if they are not successful.

Try not to use comparisons and competition as a motivation for good behavior.

Be honest and sincere when you praise me.

Help me to accept success. It will motivate me to do even better.

Set realistic challenges for me.

Show respect for my feelings, encourage me to verbalize them.

When I am faced with a choice, respect and abide by my decisions.

Make discipline immediate and brief.

Give me the opportunity to be self-reliant and independent.

Try not to do too much for me.

Allow me to make mistakes and learn from them.

Show me that you love me.

Taken from Smile Books, *'Growing up with a Smile.'*





