

*The Development of Self-Esteem among School Students*

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**ABSTRACT**

Self-esteem is a positive or negative orientation toward oneself. An overall evaluation of one's worth or value. People who are motivated will have high esteem, and having it indicates positive self-regard, not egotism. In general, the more positive your self-esteem, the more successful you will be at dealing with life. There are a number of things which causes lack of self-esteem too. Negative self-esteem is related to low self-confidence, insecurity, underachievement, anxiety, depression, acting out behaviour, sleep problem and being alone (Yarnell). It is important for all teachers and parents to understand how their children's self-esteem is created and maintained as well as how it can be diminished. The development of self-esteem plays an important role in helping individuals to make adjustment about their self-worth and competence. The primary contributor to self-esteem changes according to the stages they are in. Whatever the ability of the child is, the parents or the teachers must know ways to communicate and thereby build the self-esteem in the child. To steer the thoughts of the students in the right direction, teachers have to train them to respect individuals and not be influenced by peers' pressure or the masses. Competence builds the ego, success begets success, being loved is to give love and you command the respect of others if you have the self-esteem

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**INTRODUCTION**

The greatest barrier to achievement and success is not lack of talent or ability but, rather the fact that achievement and success, above a certain level, are outside our self-concept, our image of who we are and what is appropriate to us. The greatest barrier to love is the secret fear that we are unlovable. The greatest barrier to happiness is the wordless serve that happiness is not our proper destiny. This, in simplest statement, is the importance of self-esteem, so we must begin by understanding what self-esteem is (Branden, 1983, p.11)

The term self-esteem comes from a Greek word meaning “reverence for self”. The ‘self’ part of self-esteem pertains to the values, beliefs and attitudes that we hold about ourselves. The ‘esteem’ part of self-esteem describes the value and worth that one gives oneself. Simplistically, self-esteem is the acceptance of ourselves for who and what we are at any given time in our lives. Self-esteem is only one component of self-concept, which Rosenberg defines as ‘totality of the individual’s thoughts and feeling with reference to himself as an object.’ Self-esteem is a concept pertaining to a fundamental sense of worth to competence and worthiness in principle. In sum, self evaluation of my mind, my consciousness and the profound sense, my person. (Branden, p.12)

Whether people know it or not, everyone has a self-esteem, but some have better grasps on it than others do. Most people’s self-esteem judgements are based on what they value, their beliefs or interests, and the attitudes that they have (Beane, 1993, p.6). Therefore it is impossible to escape the notion that some one doesn’t have a self-esteem. It is whatever they make it out to be, but not only do they choose their own self-esteem, but others have a big part in deciding as well.

### **WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?**

Self-esteem generally refers to how we feel about or how we value ourselves. Self-esteem is a hypothetical construct that includes cognitive, behavioral, and affective components. Self-esteem represents an aspect of self-cognition that reflects one's perceptions about oneself. These perceptions are formed through the evaluation of one's own personal attributes and the internalization of the evaluations of others. Over the last decade, increased interest in self-esteem has been fueled by research linking high self-esteem and strong academic and social functioning in children. Conversely, low evaluations of global self-esteem appear to be associated with many personal and social concerns, such as school failure, depression, social anxiety, violence, substance abuse, and chronic welfare dependency.

When parents and teachers of young children talk about the need for good self-esteem, they usually mean that children should have “good feelings” about themselves. With young children, self-esteem refers to the extent to which they expect to be accepted and valued by the adults and peers who are important to them. Self-esteem involves an individual’s sense of self-worth (Beane, 1984, p.6)

## **DEVELOPMENT**

The development of self-esteem is important because it may play a mediating role in assisting an individual to adjust to environmental demands and to develop socially appropriate behaviors and self-regulations (Higgins, 1991). Positive self-affects may also foster development and mastery of various competencies, whereas negative self-conscious emotions may provoke behaviors that inhibit the individual's pursuit of life goals. A positive view of self will affect the feelings, behaviors, and thoughts of an individual child. The resulting sense of self-efficacy may assist the child in working through difficult times and applying the self-regulation necessary for personal growth.

### **1. Early Childhood**

The foundations of self-esteem are laid early in life when infants develop attachments with the adults who are responsible for them. When adults readily respond to their cries and smiles, babies learn to feel loved and valued. Children come to feel loved and accepted by being loved and accepted by people they look up to. As young children learn to trust their parents and others who care for them to satisfy their basic needs, they gradually feel wanted, valued and loved. Although self-esteem is forming it is not measurable before the age of five or six because up until this time the two functions of self-esteem, competence and worthiness, operate independently of each other.

### **2. Middle Childhood**

Between the ages of five and eight self-esteem becomes increasingly defined. Children begin to make judgement about their self worth and competence in five areas: physical, appearance, social acceptance, scholastic ability, athletic and artistic skills and behaviour. These areas make up the child’s global view of his/her self. Self-esteem emerges at this point in childhood because the child is able to initiate behaviour with competence,

evaluate his or her accomplishments in terms of their worthiness and experience a process or attitude between the two. As a child's age increases so do their social contacts, life experiences and the expectations placed upon them. The child develops an increasing awareness of those things they are good at and those they are not good at. Inevitably self-esteem begins to effect behaviour as the individual attempts to maintain and protect their sense of self worth against the challenges, problems and experiences of life. Self-esteem acts as a filter through which we judge our performances. In this way it determines how we approach future tasks. As children pass through early to middle childhood, they still tend to be unrealistically positive in their self-evaluations. Their ability to compare themselves with others remains limited, but they are better able to integrate and categorize some self-perceptions. Harter (1999) noted that young children tend to think in terms of absolutes (all positive or all negative). Thus, despite the tendency to be overly positive, a child may demonstrate negative self-esteem if negative life experience has emphasized negative attributes.

### **3. Late Childhood**

In middle to late childhood (8 to 11 years), children no longer think of themselves in terms of absolutes. They perceive both positive and negative aspects of their attributes and emotions. Children begin to integrate their perceptions of their attributes to form generalizations (e.g., I'm kind) (Harter, 1999). Harter noted that, at this point, children can compare themselves to their peers. At the same time, the school setting allows for more comparative judgments (Harter, 1999). With increased maturity and experience, children also begin to perceive themselves in a more differentiated way (Garcia, Hart, & Johnson-Ray, 1997; Marsh, Smith, & Barnes, 1985; Shavelson & Bolus, 1982; Shavelson, Hubner, & Staton, 1976 as cited in Jerome), August 2002). That is, they perceive themselves to be more competent or adept in some domains than in others. The extent to which their perceptions of themselves in specific domains affect their overall sense of self-worth will be influenced by how important they perceive those domains to be (Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998). By adulthood self-esteem has changed from a mostly reactive phenomenon to one that can be consciously acted upon to either increase

or decrease feelings of self worth. As adults we are confronted by many situations that affect our levels of self-esteem.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-ESTEEM**

Even though self-esteem has been studied for more than 100 years, specialists and educators continue to debate its precise nature and development. Nevertheless, they generally agree that parents and other adults who are important to children play a major role in laying a solid foundation for a child's development.

Good self-esteem is important because it helps your students to hold their head high and feel proud of their accomplishments and abilities. It gives them the courage to try new challenges and the power to believe in themselves. It allows them to respect themselves – even when they make mistakes. And when they respect themselves, adults and other friends usually respect them, too.

Having good self-esteem is also the ticket to make good choices about their mind and body. If they think they're important, they'll be less likely to follow the crowd if their friends are doing something dumb or dangerous. If they have good self-esteem, they know that they are smart enough to make their own decisions.

Success in school, getting along in a family or with peers all depend on self-confidence. Without it, children's talents may not be developed as they may be afraid to take risks or be creative. Research shows that a positive self-concept is more important to academic success than a high IQ score. Children will have greater self-esteem if they feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for their experiences.

### **WHAT CAUSES A LACK OF SELF-ESTEEM?**

There are a number of things that can cause a lack of self-esteem. The reason why those things come about is not something to discuss on this page, but we should be aware that these things in themselves affect self-esteem. Here are some of those things.

### **1. Depression**

Lots of people get depressed at some point or other, for lots of different reasons. When that happens, your esteem can be hit pretty quickly because of it. Say if a teacher promises to reward the students if the project is done well. When the project is finished, he doesn't seem to do so even if the students did a pretty job on that. The kids start to feel a little depressed when they were looking forward for that promised reward. Then they'll start to think 'the teacher doesn't like me anymore' or 'the teacher cheats me'. Depression and a lack of esteem come close to each other.

### **2. Insecurity**

Insecurity, uncertainly, even just a lack of knowledge. When you don't feel happy about something in your surroundings and you don't know what to do about it or how to change it, the student begin to liken themselves to that sometimes. Not feeling good about, or even scared of their surroundings is not a very nice thing to face, and it sometimes makes them feel the same way about themselves if it goes on for long enough, because they get wrapped up in it so much.

### **3. Abuse**

Abuse is something that comes in many ways – physical, mental, sexual, emotional. When the weaker students are in a vulnerable stage, those stronger ones will see that as an opportunity to take a advantage of it and abuse them. When they are abused in such way, it takes away their self respect.

### **4. Failure**

Failing at our objectives makes us feel like we can not achieve anything we want to and because we can't achieve, it makes a feeling of being worthless and useless. While all of these experiences are normal occurrences in the path of experience, for many they can lower confidence and ultimately self-esteem.

## 5. Criticism

Criticism is something that we sometimes misunderstand. Sometimes teacher criticises students for something they have done, it may be just because they did something which they could have done better. But if criticism is taken the wrong way, it is like another way of saying to themselves that they failed. On the hand, self-worth and self-confidence can be damaged if we are told that we are ‘not good enough’ or ‘below average’.

### WAYS TO BUILD SELF-ESTEEM

There are a multitude of factors which can effect self-esteem but arguably none is more significant than the family. This is not to imply that the family is the cause of an individual’s level of self-esteem but rather has ‘predisposing ‘effect.

In genral, the more positive the teachers’ self-esteem, the more positive the students will be. Students will watch and copy how teachers react to their successes and mistakes. Model positive responses and strategies for dealing with these experiences. Be a **good role model**. Start by building your own self-esteem.

Look at each child **as a unique person**. Make every effort not to compare a child with other classmates. Focus on the countless assets rather than what the child does not have. De-emphasize competition. Accept the child for what he or she is rather than what you want him or her to be. Be supportive of his or her interests.

**Respect**. It is important that teachers let students know that they are valued, respected and an integral and important member of the class group. Teachers need to take a proactive interet in their students’ interests.

**Honest praise** is the quickest way to build a person’s self-esteem. Find someway to praise your student every day. Make sure the praise is realistic and honest. When possible, praise your student for trying to do something even if he/she was not successful. If need be, give your child a task you know can be completed just so you can give the

praise. As your child's self-esteem grows more positive, this process will become easier and more natural.

**Communicate with your student.** That means listening to how your student feels without making judgements about those feelings. Try to find out why they feel the way they do. Once you know why, you may be able to offer a different interpretation so the child's feelings can change. Regardless, do not judge the feelings. They are just there. How your child reacts to these feelings are important because behavior has consequences. If you listen and understand, you are better able to suggest behaviors that will have positive consequences rather than negative ones.

**Focus on the positive aspects** of your students's behavior. Even if you don't like some of the behavior, find something positive to focus on.

**Keep criticism to a minimum.** Criticism does not produce positive behavior. Praise does. The alternate way of doing it is reasoning and suggesting them the ways to change their behavior.

Show your students there is a **way they can control their feelings**. All feelings can be accepted. Certain action must be limited. Take their ideas, emotions and feelings seriously. Give feedback that makes a clear distinction between the behavior and the person. When your students are feeling bad, play this game with her/him. Close eyes and remember something from the past that was fun and imagine or visualize that it was still going on. After 2 or 3 minutes, your student will begin to feel better. Explain to them that this is something they can do anytime they feel bad because they are in control of how they feel.

Teach your students to **set goals**, follow through and complete projects. The projects can be small and short in the beginning and then get more involved. Young children are more likely to benefit from tasks and activities that offer a real challenge than from those that are merely frivolous or fun. This builds self-confidence and self-esteem and shows



children they have some control in their life. Make sure the project is age appropriate and not too complicated for their level of development. Remember, the purpose is to allow them to experience success. Give praise often during the project as well as on completion. Each positive event in your student's life is building a more positive self-esteem.

**Keep expectation realistic.** Be in line with the basic facts of child development. Fit expectations with children's ages, temperaments, and backgrounds. Be careful not to base your expectations on your unfulfilled wishes and values rather than the children's wants and needs. Avoid using children to increase your status. Help children to set realistic goals for themselves.

**Give choices.** Children will not develop a sense of ownership and responsibility if other people always decide what they will do and when and how they will do it. Real choices, appropriate to children's ages, also permit them to experiment, make mistakes, and learn in non threatening situations.

**Give the freedom to make mistakes.** Help students develop the courage to be imperfect. Don't be defeated by mistakes. Learn from the experience. Teach children problem solving skills so they can continue to try. Instead of focusing on errors, encourage children.

**Give encouragement.** Recognise efforts and improvements rather than waiting to praise completed tasks. Focus on children's assets and strengths and encourage self-appreciating and positive self talk.

You can help your students develop and maintain healthy self-esteem by helping them **cope with defeats**, rather than emphasizing constant successes and triumphs. During times of disappointment or crisis, your child's weakened self-esteem can be strengthened when you let the students know that your love and support remain unchanged. When the crisis has passed, you can help your child reflect on what went wrong. The next time a

crisis occurs, you child can use the knowledge gained from overcoming past difficulties to help cope with a new crisis. A student's sense of self-worth and self-confidence is not likely to deepen when adults deny that life has its ups and downs.

**Give responsibility and expect cooperation.** Give students opportunities to help with tasks in the school. Take care to never, on a regular basis, do for your students what they can do for themselves.

Self-esteem is most likely to be fostered when children are **esteemed by the adults who are important to them**. To esteem children means to treat them respectfully, ask their views and opinions, take their views and opinions seriously, and give them meaningful and realistic feedback.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-ESTEEM AND THE IMPLICATION FOR TEACHERS**

As a teacher or a parent, you have a great influence over the self-esteem of your student. For the first 4 or 5 years, parents are the most important contributor. When children start school, teachers and friends become important. Once they reach adolescents, peer groups begin playing a greater role in steering the child's self-esteem. The more positive their self-esteem was before adolescents, the easier it will be for them to resist negative peer group pressures.

**Self-esteem is the sum and substance of one's feelings and thoughts about who we are and as such is of great importance.** If I enjoy healthy self-esteem, I value rather than am threatened by that some trait in others. People with poor self-esteem end up in company of their own kind; shared fear and insecurity reinforce negative self-assessments. And if I feel lovable and deserving of respect, I treat others well and expect them to treat me well. But if I feel unlovable and undeserving of respect and I am treated poorly, I put up with it and feel it is my fate. (Branden, p.14)

**Self-esteem is the foundation that we build the rest of us on.** Children need challenging and meaningful activities which will encourage them to achieve their potential. Each child may well have different potential but it is equally crucial that their achievements are meaningful so as to increase their opinion of their capabilities. Self-esteem will be further enhanced if children achieve in skills which are useful and of interest to themselves.

**Self-esteem, or one's sense of worth, is often fragile and sensitive to events that happen on a day-to-day basis.** Children's understanding of their identities is a reflection of how other people react to them through the events that happen on a day-to-day basis: one's self concept is the image seen in a social mirror.

**Self-esteem is critical for individuals to think about and be able to take advantage of strengths and for learning from mistakes (metacognition).** It needs to be emphasised to children that mistakes are part of the learning process for both adults and children and not a negative experience.

**Healthy self-esteem is an essential component for learning.** Self-esteem in most students 'mirrors' the appraisals of others, in particular parents and teachers. Teachers views clearly affect learners achievements. Positive appraisals over an extended time tend to increase the level of learning. Prolonged or consistent negative appraisals tend to lower learning achievement. Students tend to perform in accordance with teacher expectations and treatment.

As teachers we can be instrumental in creating a classroom environment which nurtures and supports students developing self-esteem. This can be achieved by modeling to students that mistakes are part of the learning process for both children and adults. It is important to empower and skill students to assess their achievements in a positive productive manner. This creates autonomous learners. Students need to be encouraged to develop support systems both within and outside of the classroom so that they feel confident to take risks in their learning.

**SOME AFFIRMATIONS FOR BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM**

1. I am a valuable and important person, and I'm worthy of the respect of others.
2. I am my own expert, and I allow others the same privilege.
3. I express my ideas easily, and I know others respect my point of view.
4. I am aware of my value system and confident of the decisions I make based on my current awareness.
5. I have a positive expectancy of reaching my goals, and I bounce back quickly from temporary setbacks.
6. I have pride in my past performance and a positive expectancy of the future.
7. I accept compliments easily and share my success with others who have contributed to them.
8. I feel warm and loving toward myself, for I am a unique and precious being, ever doing the best my awareness permits, ever growing in wisdom and love.
9. I am actively in charge of my life and direct it in constructive channels. My primary responsibility is for my own growth and well being (the better I feel about myself, the more willing and able I am to help others).
10. I am my own authority (and I am not affected by negative opinions or attitudes of others.)
11. It is not what happens to me, but how I handle it, that determines my emotional well being.
12. I'm a success to the degree that I feel warm and loving toward myself.
13. No one in the entire world is more or less worthy, more or less important, than I.
14. I count my blessings and rejoice in my growing awareness.
15. I am an action person; I do first things first and one thing at a time.
16. I am warm and friendly toward all I contact; I treat everyone with consideration and respect.
17. I am kind, compassionate and gentle with myself.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

It has not been much disputed, until recently, that high self-esteem – defined quite simply as liking yourself a lot, holding a positive opinion of your actions and capacities – is essential to well-being and that its opposite is responsible for crime and substance abuse and prostitution and murder and rape and even terrorism. In 1990, David Long published “The Anatomy of Terrorism.” In which he found that hijackers and suicide bombers suffer from feelings of worthlessness and that their violent, fluorescent acts are desperate attempts to bring some inner flair to a flat mindscape. (as cited Slater, internet) “There is absolutely no evidence that low self-esteem is particularly harmful,” Emler says. (cited in Slater, internet) “It’s not all a cause of poor academic performance; people with low self-esteem seem to do just as well in life as people with high self-esteem. In fact, they may do better, because they often try harder.

Last year alone there were three withering studies of self-esteem released in the United States, all of which had the same central message: people with high self-esteem pose a greater threat to those around them than people with low self-esteem and feeling bad about yourself is not the cause of our country’s biggest, most expensive social problems. All these we need to ponder and evaluate about it.

## **CONCLUSION**

Teachers can play an important role in strengthening students’ self-esteem by treating them respectfully, taking their views and opinions seriously, and expressing appreciation to them. Above all, parents must keep in mind that self-esteem is an important part of every child’s development.

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