

Ways To Build Your Teenager's Self-Esteem



Often without thinking about it, parents fortify their youngsters' self-esteem every day, whether it's by complimenting them on a job well done, kissing them good-bye (assuming they still allow it) or disciplining them for breaking a rule. But all of us have days when we inadvertently bruise children's egos or simply miss an opening to make them feel good about themselves. Here are some easy ways to help instill self-esteem.

Be Generous With Praise

"We don't tell our children often enough what they did *right*," observes Dr. Adele Hofmann. Commend your child not only for accomplishments but for effort—including those times when it fails to bring the desired results. In addition, let's encourage kids to feel proud of themselves. Pride should shine from within, not just in response to external approval.

Teens with low self-esteem may feel awkward accepting praise. If that's true of your youngster, then hand out compliments frugally. Don't slather on the praise so thick that it sounds insincere. Boys and girls have an internal radar that tells them when Mom and Dad are merely trying to make them feel good. If anything, it has an opposite effect.

Criticize When Necessary, but Constructively

But never in a hurtful or demeaning manner.

Instead of saying: "How could you have gotten that answer wrong on your chemistry test?"

Say: "You almost got the answer. With a little extra studying, I'm sure you'll do better next time."

Solicit Your Youngster's Opinions

Teenagers have no shortage of them. Include him in everyday family decisions and implement some of his suggestions. What does he think about the new couch you're considering for the living room? Adolescents love nothing better than to be treated like grownups, and they're usually flattered anytime that you invite them into the adult world.

Encourage Youngsters To Cultivate Their Talents and Interests

Everybody excels at *something*. Everybody *needs* to excel at something. Let your child follow her passion, whatever it may be. Even interests that you may consider frivolous can provide opportunities for success and a safe outlet for peer acceptance. Sports is generally a popular arena for achievement among girls as well as boys. But what if your son's talent is playing bass guitar in his heavymetal quartet "Marshmallow Bulldozer," which rattles the walls of your basement every Saturday?

Support his hobby, provided that the band, or any other pastime, doesn't interfere with more pressing responsibilities such as schoolwork. "Parents shouldn't just say no to kids," says Dr. Robert Blum of University Hospitals in Minneapolis. "They also have to say yes, to help them find positive ways of building self-esteem and exploring their self-identity."

Performing at school dances could be a boy's ticket to coolness, which just might enable him to avoid going to risky lengths in order to win friends' approval. He may also pick up some valuable skills (musical proficiency not necessarily being one of them), such as how to work as part of a team, how to persuasively present creative ideas to a "committee" and so on.

Just be aware that like boy-girl infatuations, a teenager's enthusiasm for a particular pursuit may be short-lived. Until your child demonstrates a serious commitment, you might want to hold off on buying expensive top-of-the-line equipment or lessons right away, be it ice-hockey gear, a pricey tutor for advanced calculus or an expensive racing bicycle. Some teens find fulfillment channeling their idealism into volunteer work. A study by the U.S. Department of Education found that of eight thousand students in grades six through twelve, about half had performed volunteer work during the academic year. When schools offered or arranged community service, about nine in ten youngsters took part. In some instances participation was incorporated into the curriculum, and therefore mandatory. But there were nearly as many "volunteens" from schools where community service was optional.

Kids want to feel valued not only by their families but by the greater community. "One way they feel validated is to have social roles that are meaningful and useful," asserts Dr. Blum. "When kids perform community service, they receive positive feedback that makes them feel good about themselves."

Dr. Diane Sacks, a pediatrician from Ontario, Canada, has seen this firsthand. She regularly steers some of her young patients to organizations seeking teenage volunteers. "It started when a center for the handicapped put out a call looking for kids to help lift and transport patients," she says. "Two boys in my practice had told me that they needed to do community service for school credit. I volunteered them, and it was great for them. Many teenagers with low self-esteem find it very difficult to go out and get a job, but if they're directed to a volunteer position, where the expectations may be less demanding and gratitude is expressed more openly, they flower."

To an adult, teenagers' starry-eyed idealism can seem laughably naive, as in "But there shouldn't be *any* wars!" From experience, you probably appreciate that the world and human relations are far more complex than you ever imagined back when you were a youngster. Perhaps you can now see shades of gray where you once saw only black and white. Or maybe the years have had the opposite effect, sharpening the contrast. Whichever side of the political fence you're on, isn't an adolescent's resolve to change the world refreshing in an increasingly cynical age? Let's not stand in his way.

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