

## What We Say Really Does Matter: A Parent's Role in Shaping Children's Self-esteem

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If you asked your burn-injured child today to describe himself, what words would he use? Do you think you would hear positive words such as smart, friendly, strong, attractive, or would you hear words such as, dumb, ugly, unlikeable, or slow? What if you asked his siblings the same question? A child's self-esteem begins to develop very early in life and continues throughout adulthood. The young child's self-esteem is shaped by his parents or primary caregivers and gradually becomes influenced by peers as the child enters late primary through the high school years.

### WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

A child's sense of personal worth determines his self-esteem. Obviously everyone has ups and downs, but if a child generally has good feelings about himself most of the time, he would be described as having high self-esteem. If, on the other hand, he generally has poor or negative feelings about himself, he may be described as having low self-esteem.

Many adults believe self-esteem is something they grant to children by telling them they're wonderful (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren, Soderman, 1993). Occasional praise without purpose or meaning is not as valuable to building a child's positive self-esteem as consistently acknowledging positive behaviors and interactions. A child can easily see through adults

who make false or fake statements. Keep in mind that excessive praise for activities that are average everyday occurrences for the child are not beneficial. Sincere and genuine comments about positive behavior and achievements over time can help foster a child's positive view of himself.

Adults often take for granted that children learn to feel important and confident by observing their parents and learning from their interactions. The way parents listen, discipline, praise, respect, and acknowledge their children as significant members of the family all play important roles in helping children form healthy views of themselves. Adults serve as mirrors through which children make assessments regarding their worth, competence, and control. The



*Amy Clark uses a doll to comfort children into conversation.*

reflections children perceive are manifested through adults' behavior toward them (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren, Soderman, 1993).

There are several ways adults can communicate with children to foster a positive environment and encourage children to express themselves. A great deal of this communication revolves around respecting, loving, and building trust for children. Giving your child a few moments of your full attention and sincere comments, will show him that you feel he is important. It is so natural for parents of burn-injured children to be protective of their feelings and do all the talking for the child. Avoid jumping in to answer questions and holding conversations for the child such as, "We are doing well with our therapy and we walked for the first time yesterday!" Clearly "we" didn't walk and speaking in this manner can actually damage the child's self-esteem and diminish his confidence of speaking for himself. When your child talks, be careful not to jump in with interruptions for grammar corrections or your thoughts on the subject. Listen to what he is saying and paraphrase to let him know you heard him. Approaching things from your child's point of view will help you to slow down and listen to what your child really has to say.

Children enjoy talking about themselves and their interests. Ask him for his observations and have him describe what he notices. This type of interaction encourages children to think independently and feel positive about what they have to say. When talking with children, make sure to use your manners, remember they are modeling much of their behavior after you. If you need to interrupt say "excuse me," and remember to say "please," and "thank you." Too often we become hurried in our lives and don't remember to be courteous to our families.

You can respect your child's feelings by keeping promises when you make them. If you are unable to listen to the long version of your child's story, or unable to play at a particular time, you could promise to do so later. Remember to follow through on your promise and your child will learn that all things can't happen when he wants them to, but he is important enough for your time.

Though we often take them for granted, conversations between adults and children can contribute to children's positive feelings about themselves. Think about how a child would respond

when he hears a parent yelling, "If you don't stop talking I'm never going to get the shopping done." Compare that to a parent who says, "Tell me about your field trip today. Oh you were able to feed the ducks. Do you see any food here that ducks like to eat?" Do you see a difference between these communication styles and how they could affect children's feelings about themselves? Because adults represent authority figures, this clear sign of the adult's respect, caring, and acceptance conveys a powerful message to children about their value (Sharpe 1987 a&b; Danish and Hauer, 1980). Positive adult-child conversations don't need to be planned and rehearsed sentences, they often can be valuable when worked into everyday interactions and short moments.

### **WHAT ABOUT WHEN DISCIPLINE IS NECESSARY?**

A fine balance of discipline is important in helping your child develop positive self-esteem. A parent who is too strict or too permissive will not help their child. When disciplining, remember that you are disciplining the behavior, not labeling the child as bad. Help him see that there are other ways to handle the situation that would be more acceptable. Ask the child to demonstrate a better way of behaving or responding. Be consistent and follow through on the consequences you laid out ahead of time. Take the time to learn why the child is behaving in a certain manner. Is he jealous, tired, bored, stressed, not feeling well? It's important to maintain respect for a child while disciplining by avoiding shaming and teasing. Shaming a child, especially in front of others, is only destructive to the child's self-esteem and does not teach him how to manage his behavior in the future. In many instances you want to address the behavior very soon after it happens, but if you are so angry that you may lose control, give yourself a little time to cool off before approaching the child.

Raising children to feel positive self-worth is an ongoing job for parents. Beginning as the most influential people in the child's life, parents later evolve into the supportive strong and trusted source they can turn to. Providing a consistent loving, safe, and respectful environment for your children will give them the tools they need to deal with the less than consistent real world they enter as young adults.

## EIGHTEEN WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM

1. Show unconditional love.
2. Express your anger responsibly.
3. Make clear requests.
4. Learn to listen.
5. Take your child's feelings seriously.
6. Validate your child's existence.
7. Find something to appreciate daily.
8. Spend time alone with your child.
9. Allow your child to do things for himself.
10. Respect your child's possessions.
11. Respect your child's opinions.
12. Acknowledge your child's abilities.
13. Intervene when your child puts himself down.
14. Express love nonverbally.
15. Speak to your child at eye level.
16. Avoid mixed messages.
17. Share your feelings.
18. Focus on each child's uniqueness.

(City of Hamilton Youth & Mental Health Branch)

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- Jamie Lee Curtis; Laurel Cornell, *I'm Gonna Like Me; Letting off a Little Self Esteem*, ages 4–8.



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