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## Encouraging Positive Self-Concepts in Children

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Purdue University

Cooperative Extension Service

West Lafayette, IN 47907

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# Encouraging Positive Self-Concepts in Children

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*Both Sue and Lou eagerly waited for Mrs. Johnson to return their spelling tests. Both had studied hard and hoped to make good grades.*

*When Sue saw her grade, a smile came across her face. "Wow!" she thought to herself, "I only missed four words! I did pretty well!"*

*When Mrs. Johnson gave Lou his test back, he stared at his grade and then looked down at the floor in disappointment. "Oh, no!" he thought. "I'll never do good in school. Mrs. Johnson must think I'm really stupid. I sure feel dumb!" Lou had missed four words.*

*Both Bill and Will wanted to get dates to go to the school party. Each carefully thought about who to take before making the telephone call to ask her out.*

*When Bill called Lil, she told him she was glad he had asked her but she already had a date for the party. After concluding his conversation, Bill thought, "Oh, well. Next time I will call earlier. Maybe I'll just go to the party by myself."*

*When Will's phone call ended without him getting a date, he thought, "Who would want to go out with me? She must think I'm a real creep! I'll never get a date. I guess I'll just stay home by myself and miss all the fun." It seems that Lil had told him that she already had a date for the party, but that she was glad he had asked.*

Have you ever wondered why two children can respond so differently to the same situation? Why does one student feel good about a test score and another feel discouraged about a test score that is exactly the same? What makes one boy able to respond positively to a reasonable explanation for not getting a date while another boy almost crumbles at what he thinks is rejection?

You may already be aware of the answer to these questions. All of us may be familiar with this personal characteristic but not realize the important role that it plays in our lives. It influences how we like ourselves, how we deal with others, and even the goals we set for ourselves in life.

What is this thing that can have such a great impact on our lives? It is called **self-concept**.

## What is Self-Concept?

All of us, including children, have a mental picture of ourselves. We see ourselves as short or tall, a leader or a follower, a doughnut or a hole. This picture we have of ourselves is called our self-concept.

Every person can be thought of as having an overall or general self-concept as well as more specific self-concepts, for example, regarding athletic, career, academic, or artistic ability. Thus, even though children may have an overall positive self-concept, they may have a less positive self-concept when it comes to their ability in school. In addition, children who may feel good about their ability in their classwork, may feel awkward or self-conscious when they participate in sports activities.

A positive self-concept, or high level of self-esteem, represents strong self-approval. Such people like themselves, are self-confident and self-assured. People with positive self-concepts do not necessarily think of themselves as perfect or as better than others, but they are satisfied with themselves the way they are. A negative self-concept, or low level of self-esteem, indicates strong self-rejection. Such persons do not like themselves. People with negative self-concepts tend to expect failure in what they do. They may also set goals for themselves that are too high, which only proves to themselves that they are failures when those goals cannot be reached. Or they set goals so low that their abilities are not challenged, and they feel little success when they reach those easy goals.

## Why Is a Positive Self-Concept So Important?

Self-concept is a filtering and coloring mechanism for children's daily experiences. If a child's self-concept is low, things which are seen in the world may take on a negative appearance. Children who think of themselves in a negative way may have a difficult time viewing their experiences as being good or positive. On the other hand, children who have high self-concepts tend to view things in the world in a positive way.

Whether self-concept is positive or negative can influence important areas of a child's development and achievement. Educators have recognized that there is a link between self-concept and performance in school. Students with a strong self-concept tend to have good grades and take an active role in school. They are able to accept challenges and enjoy new learning experiences. Students with a negative self-concept tend to have both attitude and behavior problems. They may be unwilling to try new things, because they believe they will fail anyway, or they may not work up to their potential. Some educators feel that a positive self-concept is so important that children need to be taught to like themselves before they are taught academic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics.

Self-concept also affects a child's relationship with others, especially family members. You may be familiar with the adage "You cannot love others unless you first love yourself." It seems that people who like themselves will generally like others, while people who dislike themselves tend to be critical of others. Children with positive self-concepts may find it easier to get along with friends, classmates, and teachers. By feeling good about themselves children can make others feel good also. Children with poor self-concepts may find it difficult to make or keep friends because of their negative attitudes and behavior. Not having friends just helps to convince them further that they are not worth being friends with.

Self-concept also affects the quality of family life. When self-concept is positive among family members, they tend to support rather than criticize each other. This helps them to feel close to each other and have good communication with each other, which may lead to a satisfying family life.

## Assessing a Child's Self-Concept

It may not always be easy, but by being alert and observing children's attitudes and behaviors, you can obtain a good idea of how much they like themselves. Think about the following questions when you observe your own or other children.

### **Positive**

- \*Do they seem to have self-confidence?
- \*Are they able to complete tasks that they set out to do?
- \*Can they point out specific things they like about themselves?
- \*Are they proud of their name?
- \*Do they get excited when offered the opportunity to try new things?
- \*Do they set goals that challenge their ability without being impossible to achieve?
- \*Do they have dreams and ideas for what they would like to be when they "grow up?"

### **Negative**

- \*Do they seem to lack self confidence?
- \*Are they easily frustrated and often quit tasks before they are completed?
- \*Do they have trouble saying positive things about themselves; or do they criticize themselves often?
- \*Are they embarrassed by their name?
- \*Do they get upset when given the opportunity to try new things because they are afraid of failing and being embarrassed?
- \*Do they set goals that are far below their ability or too difficult to achieve?
- \*Do they lack dreams and ideas of what they would like to be when they "grow up?"

By being observant and answering these questions you can make a good guess about whether a child tends to have a more negative or positive self-concept. If you answered "yes" to most of the questions on the positive side, then these children probably have an overall positive self-concept. If you answered "yes" to most of the questions on the negative side, then you may want to consider ways in which you can help these children develop a more positive view of themselves in areas where they do not feel positive. Or, you may want to strengthen those areas where they do feel positive about themselves. By knowing something about children's self-concepts, you can gain valuable insight into their behavior, understand them better, and work toward enhancing positive feelings about themselves. It is important to remember, however, that even if children have an overall positive self-concept, there may be times when they lack confidence or feel self-conscious. This may be true especially when they are tired, or ill, or trying to tackle a job that is too difficult for their ability. Also, keep in mind that a child's overall self-concept can differ from the more specific self-concepts. When observing a child, be sure to look at him/her in several different situations. Do not make a judgment based on one isolated situation or behavior.

### **Ways to Encourage a Positive Self-Concept in Children**

Adults play an important role in the development of a child's self-concept. It takes very young children a lot of growing up before they are able to picture themselves as separate persons capable of thinking and acting for themselves. During

the time that they are "painting" this picture of themselves, the relationships they have with those most important to them, particularly their parents, influence the picture they are developing of themselves. Do they feel loved and wanted? Are they able to count on their parents to meet their needs and take care of them? These are important components of a young child's self-concept development.

As children get older, besides making them feel loved and wanted, adults can influence their child's self-concept in ways they may not always be aware of. As children become aware of the adults around them, their parents and teachers serve as models to them. Adults who feel negatively about themselves and express these negative feelings may find children modeling, or imitating, these attitudes and behavior. Another way adults can influence children's self-concept(s) is by the way they apply labels to children. If adults continually label children as "bad" or "dumb," children will begin to believe these assessments, feel negatively about themselves, and act in ways that reflect the labels applied to them. In other words, they will be bad or they will act "dumb" because adults have told them they are this way. In contrast, if positive qualities of the child are emphasized by the adult, then the child's self-concept will more likely be positive as will his or her behavior. This is not to say that children with positive self-concepts will never misbehave. All children no matter how "good" they are, will disobey or test adults occasionally. However, by focusing on the child's positive attitudes and behaviors, or what the child can do instead of cannot do, adults may reduce the amount of misbehavior from children.

One step you can take in encouraging a positive self-concept in a child is to keep a log for a period of time (for example-two hours) of all the positive and negative statements you make to that child. Just make two columns on a piece of paper and keep a record of positive and negative statements. Try to do this on a "typical" day when you spend time with the child at home or in a familiar or comfortable environment, not on the day of his/her doctor's appointment or when you are shopping. If the number of positive statements is greater than the number of negative, give yourself a pat on the back. The suggestions below will provide you with ways to improve upon what you are now doing. If the number of negative statements outweighs the positive, decide whether you are ready to put effort into changing your approach. If so, take steps to incorporate the suggestions below into your behavior.

The following are suggestions for ways that you can strengthen a child's self-concept. Remember that, like all areas of human development, it will take time to see changes. If you would like to measure whether these suggestions do help the child, keep a record of the number of positive and negative statements the child makes about him/herself for a while (a day or two) before you try the ideas below. Then a few weeks or months later keep a record again to measure any change. Also, keep a log of your own statements again and compare it to your first log to see if you have improved.

**1. Help children to set reasonable goals and evaluate realistically.** Reasonable goals are individual, are made in relation to past performance, and have a long-range objective and an end-in-view. First, goals that are individual are goals that young children set for themselves. Young children may need your help in setting goals by having you provide choices, but the goal itself should be theirs. Older children should be encouraged to set their own goals, but they also may need help at first. Second, setting goals in relation to past performance means building on personal strengths and trying to make improvements that are possible for the children. Finally, be sure children have a long-range objective and an end-in-view. The end-in-view is something in which children can see day-to-day progress. It should lead toward their overall, long-range objectives. An example of a goal for eight-year-olds may be to keep their rooms clean. If their rooms now look like a tornado hit, or if you do all the cleaning for them, then an end-in-view might be to put away their dirty clothes each night. After a few weeks that could be increased by having them help to pick up toys. After a month parents may add more responsibility until the overall objective of a clean room is reached. Keep in mind that young children may need some visible sign of their progress. Post a chart in their rooms or on the refrigerator so the children can see improvements that they are making. Give them a star or a check each time they reach their goal.

When children have completed a task, they should learn to evaluate that task realistically. In helping children to evaluate realistically, emphasize that you do not expect them to be perfect, nor should they expect perfection from themselves. Encourage children to simply keep improving. When making evaluations, teach children to compare their behavior to their own past performances, and not to parents, friends, or a brother or sister. That means, did they do better than the last time? If so, they succeeded. Also, teach children to be positive in their self-evaluations. For example, look at the number correct on a test, not the number missed. Children (and adults) learn more from success

than failure.

Make failures easier to handle by finding some specific positive aspects of the experience. For example, if your son takes part in a race at school but does not finish as he had expected, you might point out how hard he practiced or that he was able to run faster than last time.

**2. Encourage children to praise themselves.** Self-praise is at the center of a positive self-concept. Self-praise frees a person from waiting for compliments from others and supports the idea that it is all right for a person to feel good about him/herself. Helping your children to praise themselves is a delicate art. It involves helping them to evaluate realistically, gain independence, and make their own judgments. When you praise children, you may make them dependent on you and your judgments. When children accomplish a task, instead of complimenting them, encourage self-praise. For example, you might say "I bet you feel good about what you have accomplished" or "How do you feel about what you did?" Be sure that the children are able to point out specific positive points about their experience or accomplishment. Also, encourage children to give themselves a verbal (or actual) "pat on the back" by speaking self-praise out loud, even when no one is around. If children feel self-conscious or afraid others will think they are bragging, go through the bragging/ self-praise list that follows and then make up more examples on your own so that children can distinguish between bragging and self-praise. By teaching children to praise themselves they will be less likely to depend on others for approval of what they have done or "fish for compliments" when they are older.

**3. Adults, praise yourselves. Children learn by imitating adults.** By praising yourself, you are showing children how to feel good about themselves and that it is all right to self-praise. However, it is not easy. When you do something you feel you did well you probably say something nice to yourself, but it is likely that you say it silently. It is important to teach yourself to say those positive things out loud, not only for yourself but also so that you can provide a positive model for your children. Tell yourself exactly what you did well and what was good about it. Begin with specific acts and then move on to more personal qualities. Praising yourself is not the same as bragging, however. Bragging usually involves trying to "prove something" to someone else, while self-praise does not. When you praise yourself you make a positive statement about how you feel about what you have done or hope to do.

If self-praise is a new experience for you, start with something simple. For example, if you and your child are coloring together you might say "I really feel good about my picture." Also, try to praise yourself in front of adults, especially your spouse or others close to you. This will strengthen your self-concept and help those around you learn to focus on the positive. You may feel awkward or self-conscious at first, but the more you use self-praise the more natural it will become.

## **Bragging**

- \*Compares behavior to others.
- \*Uses superlatives (like best, fastest, most understanding) in comparison to others.
- \* Tends to belittle others, or bestow praise on one's self at the expense of others.
- \* Sounds improbable, easy to argue with.
- \* Listener may not take statements seriously.
- \* Easy to be phony.

## **Examples:**

- \* I am the fastest runner on the block.
- \* I make a better chocolate cake than anyone I know.



## Self-Praise

- \*Compares behavior to own past performance.
- \*Uses comparatives (like better, faster, more understanding) in evaluating against one's own past behavior.
- \*Tends to enhance others or be mutually supportive.
- \*Sounds believable. Stresses speaker's feelings, therefore, difficult to argue with.
- \*Listener takes statements seriously, shares feelings with speaker.
- \*Requires self-disclosure.

### Examples:

- \*I can run a mile a whole minute faster this year than last year.
- \*I feel very confident about my chocolate just as I like it. cake. It usually turns out moist and light--just as I like it. just as I like it.

**4. Teach children to praise others.** Praise multiplies. Teaching children to praise themselves helps them to praise others, and praising others often brings praise in return. By learning how to praise others, children will become even better at looking for good things in themselves and in others instead of concentrating on the bad or weak things. One way to teach children to praise others is for you to say positive things to your children and others. Children need to practice, however, in order for a behavior to become "automatic" for them. Watch for opportunities to praise others and ask children to point out something specific they like about what someone has done. For example, if your daughter's friend has brought over his recently completed model spaceship to show your child, you might tell the other child what you like about the spaceship and ask your child to do the same. Both of you could ask the child how he feels about the project. You can also use such experiences to teach children to be honest and sincere in their praise. Suppose they do not really like what someone else has done. When you are alone with your daughter, explain to her that she should not be dishonest (for example, by saying she likes some thing when she does not). But, she can say something nice about the person, such as "You sure put a lot of work into that," or "I'll bet you are learning a lot about---"

Along with praising others, receiving praise is a skill children need to acquire. Again, as with praising others, you play an important role as a model to children. When someone says something nice about us, we often tell them that they are wrong and that we are not actually that good. Instead, try thanking them and saying something nice (and honest) in return. Also, encourage children to say thank you when someone praises them and use the opportunity to praise themselves in front of the other person.

Pick one of the four suggestions and try using it for a week. Also, discuss what you are planning to do with your spouse, partner or with fellow teachers and encourage them to try it. Children are more likely to learn if significant adults are consistent with each other in dealing with them.

At the end of the week, measure your progress. If you are doing well, add another step. If you need more practice, keep trying the first step for another week, then look at your progress again.

## Some Additional Hints

Show interest in and give attention to children. Simply paying attention to children, talking with them, and showing interest in their activities and efforts will help them feel worthwhile. If a child comes to you with a drawing, do not say "What is this supposed to be?" or start laughing because it looks funny. Show interest and appreciation for the child's effort. Comment on specific aspects of the picture, for example the bright colors or straight lines. If you are not sure what the picture is, ask the child to tell you about it in a gentle, interested way. Do not forget to encourage self-praise from the child.

Respect children by making note of their presence in front of others. Introduce them to your friends as you would anyone else. Also, let children speak for themselves if the topic of conversation is about them. Let them explain their own science projects, describe their last baseball games, or talk about their favorite subject in school.

## Summary

Helping children develop a positive self-concept may be one of the most difficult tasks of parenting or teaching. There is no easy, fool-proof formula for accomplishing this. It takes a lot of time and effort from concerned adults like you. You can feel good about yourself for taking the initiative and time to read this booklet which has, hopefully, provided you with some ideas to assist you in promoting a positive self-concept in your children. In order to help you implement some of the suggestions offered, keep in mind the word **PRAISE** and what each letter stands for:

P--Praise yourself, and help others to do the same.

R--Respect children.

A--Accept children.

I--Invest time in children.

S--Set reasonable goals.

E--Evaluate your accomplishments realistically.

## Recommended Readings:

### For Parents

Briggs, Dorothy. *Your Child's Self-Esteem*. New York: Doubleday, 1970.

Felker, Donald W. *Building Positive Self-Concepts*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Burgess, 1974.

Satir, Virginia. *Peoplemaking*. New York: Science and Behavior Books, 1972.

### For Children (approximately 8 years and up)

Burns, Marilyn. *I Am Not a Short Adult! Getting Good at Being a Kid*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1977.

### Activities for Youth Groups

HE-579 Impact Series: "*But I'm All I've Got!*" Available from: Publications Mailing Room, Cooperative Extension Service, 301 South 2nd Street, Lafayette, IN 47905-1092. Price: \$1.00

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