Parenting Exchange

The Road to Good Self Esteem Begins in Childhood

by Karen Stephens

I like oranges.
I like you.
I like birds.
I like me to.

I can't claim copyright to that tiny poem; it was written by a seven year old. The poem expresses sentiments all parents hope their children will feel: self acceptance, self appreciation, and self respect.

Most of our parenting efforts reflect more basic needs. We try to keep kids as safe as we can in today's world. We make sure they have a roof over their heads and that they are adequately dressed, well fed, warm, and dry.

But parents also want to make sure their kids feel important and special. They often quiz me about children's self esteem. "What is it?" "Can you *give it* to a child?" "How do you know if a child has good self esteem or not?"

> "Self concept develops over a lifetime; it is not stagnant or set in time."

It would be lovely if there were a magic potion that would automatically imbue children with high self esteem. But like other parenting responsibilities, it's not as easy as that.

Mistakenly, self concept is often used interchangeably with self esteem. There is a subtle and important difference between them. Self concept is the picture of our self that each of us carries around in our mind — and heart. It refers to traits or characteristics we believe describe us. In itself, self concept is not good or bad. It is what it is. Self concept develops over a lifetime; it is not stagnant or set in time.

Self esteem refers to the degree to which we do or do not like the self-portrait we mentally create. Is the picture positive or negative? Are we liked or loathed? Desirable or disdained? That's self-esteem, and it can be high or low, good or bad, positive or negative.

Consider two children, both of whom talk a lot. One grows up thinking of his talkative nature as an asset. He describes himself as friendly, outgoing, extroverted and fun to be around. The other child grows up believing his talkative nature is cause for shame, embarrassment, and ridicule. He thinks of himself as a motor mouth, show off, a self-centered blabbermouth and other unflattering adjectives he might have heard during childhood. The picture, or self concept, of the two children is the same — talkative. Whether *talkative* is considered to be a desirable or undesirable trait affects the level to which each boy likes, or esteems himself.

Self esteem is an abstract concept. It's illusive and hard to pin down. It's not something you can hold in your hand, but telltale signs of its presence — or absence — are bountiful.

Positive self esteem means a child places value on his personal characteristics. With positive self esteem comes a feeling that one is unique, talented, lovable, competent, and important in the lives of others.

But it doesn't mean a child must feel he or she is the most important person in the world. A healthy self esteem means a child perceives him or herself as an individual who is as

important as everyone else, and deserving of the same rights, needs, and care as anyone else — no more and no less. Children with good self esteem speak well of themselves. They are able to name a number of skills they possess. They believe they are fun play partners. They enjoy life.

Low self esteem means a child does not believe he is valuable, worthwhile, or very lovable. Low self esteem is associated with lack of self respect and self destructive behavior. I once knew a five year old who hit his head on a wall whenever he made even the smallest mistake. He would chant, "I'm bad. I'm bad. I'm bad." He had no patience or compassion for himself. He was self critical to an extreme. As you can guess, low self esteem is not a pleasant thing to experience. It's heartbreaking to witness.

How do self concept and self esteem develop? Not surprisingly, both are influenced by how parents treat children on a daily basis. Small things help kids feel proud of their achievements. When that pride is combined with a parent's attentiveness, children feel cherished and loved.

I'm talking about small things like wake-up hugs, drawings on the fridge, Sunday morning pancakes in the shape of bears, photos on the mantel, stars on the papers, warm fuzzies at child care drop off, walking the dog together and cartoon Band-Aids tenderly placed to cover little scratches. The little things that wrap up day's end are important, too, like a dependable routine of a good bedtime story topped off with eyelash butterfly kisses just before a nightlight casts its sleepy glow.

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Those interactions provide children with feedback that is used to build the bricks and mortar of self esteem. Self concept expands further as children interact with siblings and the community beyond home. The responses children receive when playing with friends, attending social functions, and during school help define who they are and influence how worthwhile they feel.

By the time children become adults, each of us will play a role in helping them feel valued in our community. If we invest time today in building children's self esteem, we will all reap the dividends as they become well-adjusted, productive adults of tomorrow.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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