

SELF ESTEEM – IT’S NOT WHAT YOU THINK

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Self-esteem is one of the most over-discussed and vaguely-defined terms in parenting literature. Experts have different definitions of self-esteem, and at least as many differing theories on how to develop self-esteem in children. While psychologists debate over the definition and methods to develop self-esteem, there seems to be little debate over its importance in developing happy successful children. I would not disagree.

There is an organization called The National Association for Self-Esteem. They define self-esteem as, "The experience of being capable of meeting life's challenges and being worthy of happiness." (<http://www.self-esteem-nase.org/what.php>). I like this definition, but I think it's incomplete. Having worked with children for over 20 years, I think this definition is missing two components. First, children (and adults), need the ability to accurately self-evaluate in order to decide whether they are capable or not. You can have an experience that demonstrates your capability, but if you cannot accurately self-evaluate, then you might walk away with the idea that you were simply fortunate to be in the right place or the right time. Or, conversely, you might have actually just been in the right place at the right time, and if you do not have the ability to honestly and accurately self-evaluate, then you might walk away with the idea that you were capable, but were not. Secondly, I believe that the ability to experience being capable is the understanding and the belief that your value does not depend upon your accomplishments, but that your accomplishments depend on your ability to see yourself as valuable.

There has been a movement in parenting and educational institutions to give children self-esteem through rewards, praise, and acknowledgement of success and accomplishments. Sticker charts, trophies for everyone, verbal celebrations, prizes, and awards, are all examples of the drive to instill self-esteem in children. The thinking is that if we give children enough acknowledgement and praise then they will see themselves as valuable. The problem is that praise and external validation does not help children honestly self-evaluate. Instead, it focuses children's attention on the evaluation of others. They develop "other esteem", not self-esteem.

When my son was 9-years old, he decided that wanted to learn how to play basketball. The local YMCA had a league, and he wanted join. I was a little trepidatious because he had never played basketball before, and I was worried about how he might feel playing amongst other boys who had been playing for a few years. We went to the Y a few times to practice, but with little time between his decision and the start of the season, we didn't gain much ground. The season started, and other than an occasional question as to why the other kids didn't pass him the ball very often, he seemed undaunted at the skill and experience gap between himself and the other kids, and eager to go to practices and games. At the end of the season, there was an award ceremony where the coaches gave out trophies to everyone who played, regardless of ability level.

After the ceremony we got into the car, and he asked me, "Why did they give me a trophy, I was the worst guy on the team?" His tone made me chuckle. There was no evidence self-pity or ill feelings. He was upbeat, unself-conscious, sincerely curious, and a bit confused as to why he got a trophy. I'm not sure what I said when I answered him, because I was more intrigued with the apparent detachment of

his feelings of self-worth from his basketball skills. A week later I found the trophy floating around the back of my mini-van, on the floor, as I vacuumed. I brought it in the house and asked him if he wanted it. He said, simply, "No thanks." In the last four years, he has never spoken an ill word about his experience playing basketball. He is a great skier, a terrific writer, an adequate soccer player, and a terrific big brother. He knows these things about himself.

We do children a great service when we teach them self-evaluation skills rather than teaching them to depend upon the praise and evaluation of others. Adults can help children develop self-evaluation skills by celebrating mistakes as an opportunity to learn, and by asking questions rather than offering praise or rewards, and giving opportunities for children to contribute meaningfully. In addition, one of the greatest gifts we can give our children, when they are young, is to allow them to experience failure. Not set them up for failure, but allow them to try, and not succeed, and to self-evaluate. To understand that their value is not dependent upon their successes or from the opinions of others, and to find, for themselves, what their gifts and talents are, and what they are not. And, ultimately, to understand that their gifts can help others. When we know that we can help others, in a meaningful way, that is when we know we are valuable.