

PROMOTING **POSITIVE SELF ESTEEM** IN CHILDREN



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– ALVIN PRICE

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

You are likely here because you love a child and want to do your part in creating a successful, thoughtful young person with positive self-esteem. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, sitters and others who interact with children on a regular basis play a big role in their development. It truly takes a village.

Enlisting all the adults who are part of the village to agree on expectations, responsibilities and consequences is no small task. Getting them to follow through is even more difficult. Unfortunately, any weak links on this team can undermine the long-term goal - a responsible and emotionally healthy young adult.

Hopefully, you can share your insights and skills with these other adults in a way that they will hear you.

The influence of family in the first few years of life is undeniably the most important in creating a solid foundation for positive self-

esteem. Regardless of how the family is identified, the most critical task is working together in the best interest of the child.

Setting limits and rules for toddlers is the beginning of creating consistent expectations and consequences. It makes it so much easier to set limits for them in school, as pre-teens and in their teen years.

*"It is easier to build strong children
than to repair broken adults."*

– Frederick Douglass

Truer words have never been spoken.

School is the next big influence in the development of self-esteem. Since confidence is the outcome we seek, the learning environment is a crucial piece. There are many moving parts that lead to real confidence – not be confused with self-importance.

It begins and ends with clear expectations, accountability and consequences.

As you learn more about self-esteem in this report, you'll find an example story that exemplifies many important principles. You'll learn about Ben and Maria, siblings from a two-parent home with very different parenting experiences - and very different early outcomes.

Ben's experience shows that even those who have learning difficulty can become confident, successful young people with the right team of adults supporting them. Likewise, Maria's story shows that regardless of aptitude, confidence requires much more.

The end of this report has some self-reflection questions for you as a parent. You may find it helpful to write down your responses to these questions before you begin, and then again after you finish. As you learn more, you may find that your responses change.

Here's to emotionally healthy young adults...

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Self-esteem is based on our belief in our own worth – the confidence we have in ourselves. It is a subjective assessment of ourselves that changes over time, and day to day, for some. It is often used interchangeably with self-worth, self-confidence, and self-regard.

People who have good self-esteem are usually more self-assured, and therefore often willing to take more chances that lead to positive results. They're less concerned about making mistakes and looking foolish to others.

Those with low self-esteem may second-guess themselves, feel somehow “less than” others, and be overly concerned about what other people think of them.

How Do We Develop Self-Esteem?

Like many things, self-esteem is the result of our interactions with people whose opinions

shape our core personality. Usually authority figures, such as parents, teachers and others, their opinions and interactions are important to our developing sense of self – of who we are as a person.

We see ourselves as others see us, especially as children. Those who receive the message, verbally or otherwise, that they are accepted, able, and worthy are more likely to view themselves in that way. The opposite is unfortunately true, as well.

It is not uncommon to recognize patterns of low self-esteem that run throughout our lives. Often rooted in childhood experiences or learned from the behavior of others, low self-esteem can begin early and may impact all areas of life.

THE GREAT SELF-ESTEEM EXPERIMENT

In the 70s, parenting experts and others came up with the idea that we should collectively support the development of positive self-esteem by using praise for the slightest accomplishment (like showing up) and downplaying (if not totally ignoring) any type of failure.

This experiment included changing the grading system in schools so that instead of passing or failing, kids either needed improvement, satisfied, or exceeded expectations. Tee ball and other sports became cooperative instead of collaborative. Rather than competition, we all focused on cooperation.

The outcome was, in a word, a huge failure.

While the focus on praise for effort is a good one, and fostering cooperation and collaboration is critical, removing expectations and accountability from the equation really makes a mess of things.

Rewarding kids or adults for showing up but putting in no effort to achieve results can lead to an exaggerated sense of accomplishment for basically nothing.

Showing up should be mandatory, not rewarded.

Consider homework, for example. Your child brings their book bag home, which may be an accomplishment for some, but a given for most. They actually have the book in the bag and their homework assignment. They sit at the table for an hour, doing nothing. Or worse, playing on their cell phone.

Which behavior is the expectation? That they show up with books or complete homework assignments?

Do you set the expectation to complete homework and give them consequences for falling short of the goal - failing to do what is expected? Or, call the teacher and make an excuse for them so they don't experience the natural consequences of their behavior?

Think about it:

- What does a kid learn when we lie on their behalf to protect them from reality?
- What message does it send when we run interference between our kids and their consequences?
- Is that the behavior you want more of?
- What happens when we do not allow our children to deal with their failures?
- How do kids learn coping skills if they never experience failure or negative consequences?
- How do people learn responsibility without expectations?

In the great self-esteem experiment, the goal was to protect kids from negative consequences, so they would feel good about themselves. The thinking at the time was that negative consequences, or failure, would damage their self-esteem – they would see themselves as lacking, failures or some equivalent.

In effect, we were trying to build a strong ego – and we did – but **it resulted in a sense of self-importance without the confidence that comes with accomplishment.**

We inadvertently created a generation of adults who have difficulty accepting any kind of criticism or negative feedback, expect to be rewarded for showing up, and resent having expectations placed on them. In other words: entitled.

The Story of Ben and Maria – Siblings with very different experiences

Ben has always struggled in school. He has learning problems in math and spelling but excels in sports. He's on the varsity basketball team, which requires that he keep at least a C average in his classes. His success in basketball and teamwork among teachers, coaches, and parents help keep him motivated in class.

Although Ben has trouble with academics, his teachers love him. He is a kind, respectful teenager and tries to do his best in school. Ben's mom is a strong advocate, but she has clear expectations and boundaries about his school work.

Ben knows that he can ask for help anytime he needs it. He also knows that Mom will not make excuses for him if he doesn't turn in his homework or study for tests. And the consequences for failure are clear – no basketball.

Ben's coach is invested in both his academic and sports success. He encourages Ben to do his best both on the court and off. When he fails or makes mistakes, Coach and Mom help him process the experience and learn what he can from it.

Ben is so motivated by basketball that he gives 100% in the classroom.

However, at times, he makes failing grades in math.

When Ben's favorite aunt died, he had difficulty sleeping and focusing in class. He kept up his homework but failed two tests in math. The week before homecoming, Ben received an F on his report card. It would have been easy to give him a pass under the circumstances – losing his favorite aunt was very difficult for Ben.

Although basketball was important to him and he was experiencing a significant loss, he accepted responsibility for making a failing grade. Ben understood that he would need to sit out until mid-term grades were reported.

Meanwhile, he dressed out for games and sat on the bench – never missed practice and continued to support the team. He also asked to do extra credit work in math, which helped with his GPA.

Ben's mom realized that basketball was his motivation for keeping up his grades and largely how he managed to feel confident despite academic challenges.

She also knew that not following through with these consequences would be failing Ben. **The delicate balance between succeeding in sports and accountability in schoolwork contributed to his positive self-esteem.** It took a whole team of adults with Ben's best interest at heart to make this work.

Maria, Ben's sister, was an entirely different story. She was the youngest child and only girl. From a young age, she was treated as a princess by her doting father and grandparents. She

was gifted academically and bored in school by the end of first grade.

Maria had no interest in sports, art, or other extracurricular activities.

However, she had an innate love for animals and could not wait to get home every day to play with the dog and cat, Missy and Magic. The only way to persuade her to do homework was by removing the pets from her study area until she finished her work.

Maria's parents were not in agreement on parenting. Dad left it up to mom to deal with Ben, but often undermined her efforts with Maria. Although Mom tried to hold Maria accountable for homework and chores, Dad allowed her to play with the pets during study time.

The consequences of not caring for Missy were clear – Maria would clean up any messes. When Maria neglected to take the dog out for walks and potty breaks as agreed on when they

adopted her, Dad cleaned up the mess when Mom was not around.

Despite her academic gifts, Maria did not feel good about school. She reported feeling lost in a pool of students who were overachievers and wanted to be a dog groomer after she finished high school. The thought of continuing higher education was of no interest to her. It was difficult to get her up in the mornings and she was often late for school.

When she received detention for excessive tardiness, her dad tried to intervene and persuade the Vice Principal to reconsider. This worked the first time, but not the next time just a month later.

When she refused to stay after school for detention, she received another hour of detention with the understanding that she would be suspended for three days if she did not serve detention as assigned.

Maria's grades began to slip when her aunt died, and she stopped talking to and about her friends. Everyone was concerned about her, including Dad and her grandparents. The loss of her aunt was significant and brought everything else to the surface.

When they began family therapy, the first challenges identified were low self-esteem and lack of parental agreement on rules, consequences, and follow through.

The therapist helped the adults work on their part of the issue, and enlisted Ben to help Maria accept responsibility for her choices by spending more time talking with her when she needed support.

Maria learned to think before acting.
Volunteering for the local rescue became both a reward and a way to reinforce her success.

Over time, Maria became more engaged in school and started a weekly community service project between her school and the rescue organization. Her grades improved as part of the agreement for managing the community service project, and she made friends with many of the volunteers.

She blossomed with the success of the program and became more confident in herself.

STEPS TO POSITIVE SELF ESTEEM

How Can I Help My Child Develop Positive Self-Esteem?

Self-esteem comes from within. It isn't something we can give our children, but **we can foster it by teaching them the skills they need to gain confidence.** Part of that process entails allowing them the freedom to make choices - and to fail.

Learning from failure is part of the process. For those who have illusions of control over their kids, this can be difficult. Control is often disguised as protection or safety, which is part of parenting, but within limits.

Step 1: Communicate Expectations with Accountability Clearly

Expectations lead to accountability. Be clear about your expectations. Ensure you both

agree on the expectations. **If needed, spell it out step-by-step.** This is part of teaching kids what you want them to do, rather than just punishing them for doing it wrong, or different, from your wishes.

“Each day, I want you to bring your books home, along with the assignments for each class. After you finish your snack, do your homework. When I get home at 6:00, I will review your assignments for the next day. If they are not complete, you will not have any phone, tv, or computer time until everything is complete. Any questions?”

“For every day that your assigned chores are completed before bed, you will earn \$2. If the chores are not completed, you receive no allowance for that day.”

If needed, outline specifically what needs to be done for a chore to be considered complete, such as, “Make your bed, pick up everything lying around, and put clothes away or in the hamper.”

Step 2. Get All the Adults on the Same Page

Clear rules and expectations should be agreed upon by all adults, including grandparents and sitters.

Help others understand that inconsistency leads to many problems, not the least of which is teaching your kids how to manipulate people and decrease the possibility of producing responsible, confident adults.

If there are disagreements, work it out without your child suffering the consequences of adults letting them down.

Step 3. Be Consistent. Follow Through and Negotiate any Changes Explicitly

Your kids must take responsibility for their choices – and you do, too. If you make it clear that homework will be checked when you get home from work, check the homework. Do it

every day. Hold up your end of the deal. Show them that school is a priority.

If you're inconsistent in following the guidelines you put in place, you're sending a message that this issue is not important – and that you can't be trusted to follow through with your responsibilities. **You're inadvertently teaching your child that you aren't trustworthy.**

The result is mixed messages and a child who may take advantage of this by slacking off on their end of the deal.

If there's a ballgame or another extracurricular activity after school and homework needs to be done at a different time, make that explicit. Make clear plans in advance whenever possible. "Do your homework after dinner tomorrow since you'll be late getting home."

Step 4. Allow Them to Experience the Natural Consequences That Arise From Their Choices

You must be willing to let them fail. This is where most people stop nodding in agreement.

This requires that your self-esteem can withstand any judgment from teachers, family, friends, and others. And, that you understand that you have a limited amount of control over another human, even your child.

You also must be willing to tolerate the conflict it may cause in your home and family.

With any luck, you may only have to allow this to go to the extreme a few times before they get the message. For example, your child will begin to realize that it is their responsibility to do what is required for school, and that you won't protect them from the consequences of their actions and choices.

"It's time for bed. I see that your homework still isn't complete. You'll have to go to school tomorrow and tell the teachers that you didn't complete your homework."

“If you receive detention, you’ll need to serve it. If you get a failing grade, you’ll need to work harder the rest of the year to recover. The coach will drop you from the roster for the year. If you don’t get credit for the class, you may have to repeat it in summer school – and earn the money to pay for it.”

Stand firm – get all adults in agreement.

Step 5. Help Them Learn From Their Failures and Shortcomings

Failing is most helpful when we learn something from it. We all must learn to live with our decisions and actions, or inaction. If and when they’re willing, ask your children to tell you what they learned from the experience.

However, avoid asking this when the tension is high. After the incident, find a teachable moment in which to discuss it. Talk about how they can handle this situation differently in the future.

They may make the wrong choice again and again. If so, at some point, **they will finally realize that when they make that choice, they're also choosing the consequences that go with it.**

We all make choices that are not the best option – even though we know the consequences. That happens. Learn to let go and always love them while sticking to your standards, even when you're disappointed, and they're miserable.

“Are you ready to talk about what went wrong and what you can do differently next time?” If not, let it go and say, “Let me know when you're ready to talk about it.”

Step 6. Encourage Good Behavior and Avoid Reinforcing Bad Behavior

“Catch them being good” is a phrase that can't be overstated. **When your kids do things that you want to see more of, thank them.** Tell them you appreciate them and use your words to describe what you like. “I

appreciate it when your chores are done early, and we can relax after dinner.”

Reinforce their efforts even when they miss the mark. “I know you tried your best on the math test. Maybe your teacher can offer some guidance on what you missed.”

Be careful that you don’t inadvertently lower the expectations.

For example, the expectation is that chores are done before bed, so avoid going overboard with praise for doing what is expected. Acknowledge it with a simple “Thanks for cleaning your room today.” Hopefully, you’re already reinforcing this behavior, such as with a weekly allowance.

Completing the chores early and without any stress is something you want to praise and reinforce – going beyond the minimum.

Step 7. Set up Opportunities for Your Child to Succeed

Allow children to make choices from an early age, within reason. “You need to put on a coat before leaving for school. Do you want to wear the red or green one?” This doesn’t give them the option to go without a coat. It’s a safe way to teach decision-making.

As they get older, the choices become riskier, but that is part of the developmental cycle. Those who begin making decisions at an early age will develop more confidence, and therefore, are more likely to take calculated risks.

Giving them more choices within reason builds more confidence.

If they mess up a lot, say coming home at 10 instead of 8:30, you can easily say “I may have overestimated how much freedom you can handle right now. Weekend curfew will be 7:00 now, and we’ll revisit this when you demonstrate the ability to adhere to that curfew for a while.”

Step 8. Love Them Anyway

Learn to detach from the outcome. Do what you can to uphold your responsibility to your children and accept that you can't control the outcome.

Always separate the behavior from the child. "I don't like what you did, but I love you."

The Self-Esteem Ladder

Expectations lead to accountability.

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Accountability leads to responsibility.

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Responsibility leads to choices.

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Choices lead to consequences.

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Consequences lead to critical thinking.

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Critical thinking leads to taking more calculated risks.

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Taking risks leads to success and failure.

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Success and failure lead to learning.

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Learning leads to growth.

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Growth leads to confidence.

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Confidence leads to expectations.

YOUR NEXT STEPS

Consider these self-reflection questions in your endeavor to promote positive self-esteem in your children:

- How often do you provide opportunities for your child to learn by allowing them to make decisions on their own?
- How well do you uphold your responsibilities by being clear about expectations and consequences, following through, and working together with other adults?
- How do you talk about mistakes and failures to help your children learn?
- Do you always separate the misdeed from the child?
- In what ways do you show that you appreciate their efforts when they do their best?

- How do you reinforce good behavior and choices?
- Do you allow your kids to experience negative consequences for choices and behavior? In what situations is this more difficult for you?

Be honest with yourself. If you wish to experience improvement in any area, set some goals and get help with parenting, if needed. Your children deserve it!