

early years are learning years

Self-esteem and young children: You are the key

It's been known for more than 100 years that a child's emotional life strongly influences his interpersonal relations, behavior, and learning. Recent research underscores the importance of the early childhood years as a critically important period for the development of future mental health and self-esteem. Children with a healthy sense of self-esteem feel that the important adults in their lives love them, accept them, and would go out of their way to ensure their safety and well-being. Low self-esteem (feeling unwanted, unloved, and unaccepted) can often lead to learning disabilities, disciplinary problems, and depression later in life. Following are some essential elements for what young children need for healthy emotional development.

Commitment

Every child needs at least one reliable, responsive adult who is connected to and available to them for the long term. Without this, children are unlikely to learn to trust, or suffering the anguish of broken trust, learn not to trust again. This creates permanent damage in their ability to develop productive relationships, possibly including relationships with child care professionals and teachers. In addition, a child who lacks an adult to count on and to comfort her doesn't feel lovable and may not behave "lovably." Because she has never experienced and absorbed compassion, she has none to give. A warm and caring adult can sometimes tip the balance between a child who learns and a child who learns to fail.

Communication

Communication is the vehicle for intellectual development, exchanging information, sharing feelings, and developing strong emotional bonds. A parent or family member who chats encouragingly with a child about many of the things he's doing, thinking, and feeling enhances the child's language development, and helps him build confidence in his independence.

Boundaries

Reasonable and reasonably consistent limits help a child feel safe, feel like a good person, and feel likable. Usually, a child will not strive to meet the standards set by adults, will not curb her urgent impulses, and will not bother to make the extra effort, unless those standards are achievable for her developmental stage, she understands the limits, and she likes and respects the adult.

Appreciation

A child's sense of self-worth is more likely to deepen when adults respond to the child's interests and efforts with appreciation rather than just praise. Excessive praise or flattery may raise doubts in children, and many will dismiss an adult who heaps on praise as one who is not very believable.

Coping strategies

You can help a child develop and maintain healthy self-esteem by helping him cope with difficult situations. Coping strategies include sharing, managing anger, resolving conflict,

and dealing with stress. During times of disappointment or crisis, a child's weakened self-esteem can be strengthened if you let her know that your love and support remain unchanged. When the crisis has passed, you can help the child reflect on what went wrong. The next time a crisis occurs, she can use the knowledge gained from overcoming past difficulties.

Modeling

Essential for social learning, positive, competent, and effective role models teach children about the importance of becoming productive and caring individuals.

It takes time to nurture children. They require lots of leisurely time with loved ones and with others who enjoy them. Parents, child care professionals, and teachers can play an important role in strengthening children's self-esteem by treating them respectfully, taking their views and opinions seriously, and expressing appreciation to them.

Additional Resources

Greenberg, P. 1998. Some Thoughts about Phonics, Feelings, Don Quixote, Diversity, and Democracy: Teaching Young Children to Read, Write, and Spell. *Young Children* 53 (4).

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