



# **How Children Develop Self Esteem**

## **How Children Develop Self-Esteem**

By Dr. Margaret Paul

**As loving as you may be with your children, if you are not loving with yourself, your children may absorb your core shame beliefs.**

"I don't get it," Linda said in a phone session with me. "We've been loving and supportive with Dillon since he was born. Yet here he is at six years old, already feeling badly about himself. I've even heard him judge himself, even though we have never judged him. Could he be getting all of this at school?"

As conscious parents, we want our children to have high self-esteem. Yet, like Linda, the parents I work with are often mystified regarding their children's low self-esteem. They treat their children far better than they were treated, yet they discover that their children seem to have the same sense of low self-worth as they have.

Children develop their high or low self-esteem in two major ways:

- How we treat them
- How we treat ourselves.

Even if you treat your children with deep love and respect, if you are judgmental toward yourself, your children will likely learn to be judgmental toward themselves. Children seem to pick up our self-judgments even if we never verbalize them. They seem to be able to absorb our thinking even if they never hear it. They can see and feel how we feel about ourselves. If you come from the core shame belief that you are not good enough, it is unlikely that your children will believe that they are good enough. In their minds, how can they be good enough if you aren't?

Think about this for a minute: when you meet someone, can you feel whether or not this person feels good about himself or herself? Many of us unconsciously pick up cues regarding when someone has low self-esteem, and our children do the same thing. This is why it is so important for parents to be practicing Inner Bonding and moving from self-judgment to self-acceptance.

While teachers and peers can certainly have an effect on a child's self-esteem, the greater influence is in the home. By the time a child goes

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to school, even pre-school, he or she has likely already developed some level of core shame. Our beliefs are developed very early in our lives, so by the time a child is three years old, he or she has already developed the wounded self with its many false beliefs.

If you want your children to have high-self esteem, then you need to learn to treat them AND YOURSELF with deep caring, kindness, respect, compassion, acceptance and understanding.

It is far easier for many parents to be loving to their children than to be loving to themselves. Linda and her husband Brad are good examples of this. Both Linda and Brad are devoted parents. They are attentive, accepting and supportive of their children's individuality. They are warm, affectionate and emotionally available with their children. They each spend daily quality time with their children. Yet neither of them do this with themselves. Both Linda and Brad tend to ignore their own feelings and needs. Both are judgmental toward themselves. Neither spends quality time with themselves. They both make their children's feelings and needs far more important than their own feelings and needs. As a result, they are noticing Dillon's low self-esteem.

As parents, you are the role models for your children. Regardless of how you treat them, it is likely that they will learn to treat themselves the way you treat yourselves.

There is no way around this. If you want your children to have high self-worth and be personally responsible for their own feelings and needs, then you need to take time daily for your Inner Bonding work, to develop your own personally responsible loving Adult.

### **Parenting: Is Praise a Judgment?**

By Dr. Margaret Paul

**You might think that praising a child helps his or her self-esteem. However, research indicates that the opposite is true.**

My daughter emailed me an article by Alfie Kohn called "Five Reasons to Stop Saying 'Good Job!'" She wanted to know what I thought of the

article because she found herself constantly saying "Good job!" to my two-year-old grandson, Everest.

"When you kids were little," I told her, "I was very careful not to use the words 'good' and 'bad'. If a parent can constantly give approval, they can also take it away. Approval feels good to kids and they can get addicted to it. I'm sure you want Everest to do well for the satisfaction he receives within, rather than for your approval. Sometimes, praise can take away the inner satisfaction."

One of the things that my parents inadvertently did well is that they rarely noticed what I did. They barely glanced at my report cards. They never knew when I had homework or tests. As a result, I was left to decide for myself how well I wanted to do in school, or how well I wanted to do with my art, athletics, or anything else. It was all up to me, and I discovered early that I loved the feeling of doing well - not for any external approval, but just because it felt good inside. I valued myself when I did well.

As a result, I always did extremely well at everything I did, just because I wanted to. No one had to motivate me with praise or disapproval.

When I became a parent, I thought a lot about what motivates children. I realized that I had deep faith that each child is internally motivated, and I didn't want to do anything to disrupt this internal motivation. I realized that expressions such as "good job!" were really manipulations - judgments intended to direct a child's behavior toward what a parent valued.

Now Alfie Kohn has presented research that actually supports my thinking. He offers research that indicates that praise such as "good job" has the following negative results:

- Children feel manipulated and controlled by the praise, and may resist the covert control.
- Children can get addicted to the praise and lose their self-motivation.
- Children can lose their own pleasure in their accomplishments as they become externally referenced.
- If the praise is not continuous, children can lose interest, since their behavior is being motivated by the praise rather than their inner good feelings of accomplishment.

- Children may start to underachieve, due to the tension they feel at having to keep up the "good job."

I am very glad that I followed my instincts to trust my children's internal motivation. All three of my children did very well in school and are doing very well in their work as adults. All of them found meaningful work that they enjoy by following their own internal desires, rather than following what someone else told them to do.

Telling a child that you love his painting - if indeed you really love it - is far different than saying "good job." But it is really important to be honest with children. If you tell them you love everything they do or make, they will learn to discount your opinion. They will know they are being manipulated to feel good about themselves. It is just as damaging as saying "How come you didn't get an A+?" when they got an A. They will lose perspective on what they value and what they do not value about themselves and about their achievements.

What children need more than praise is love. They need to feel you cherishing their true Self, their Essence. They need to know that you will love them even if they mess up or fail.

When you truly see and value your own Essence, you can see and value theirs. When they see you valuing yourself in the face of mistakes and failure, they will trust your true valuing of them and learn to value themselves.

## **Parenting: What Praise Helps and What Praise Harms?**

By Dr. Margaret Paul

**Astounding research shows that praising children for their abilities actually lowers their level of achievement and self-esteem, while praising them for their effort actually increases their IQ and sense of self-worth!**

*"...telling children they're smart...made them feel dumber and act dumber."*

--Mindset, by Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., p.74

In her extraordinary book, *Mindset*, Dr. Carol S. Dweck presents research that, hopefully, will change the course of parenting and education. In one of her research studies, conducted with hundreds of mostly early adolescent students, she:

“...gave each student a set of ten fairly difficult problems from a non-verbal IQ test. They mostly did well on these and when they were finished we praised them.

We praise some of the students for their ability. They were told: "Wow, you got [say] eight right. That's a really good score. You must be smart at this...."

We praise other students for their effort: "Wow, you got [say] eight right. That's a really good score. You must have worked really hard." P. 71-2

As it turned out, the students who were praised for being smart started to do worse, and didn't enjoy the harder problems, fearing being exposed for not being as smart as the researcher thought, while 90% of the students praised for their effort tried harder and enjoyed the harder problems. In fact, they found the harder problems "the most fun." In the end "the performance of the ability-praised students plummeted," while the "effort kids showed better and better performance."

“Since this was a kind of IQ test, you might say that praising ability lowered the students' IQs. And that praising their effort raised them.” P. 73

This is powerful research for parents and educators. As I look back on the kids I grew up with and went to school with, I can see this in action. Often, the kids who were told how smart or talented they were, or how much natural ability they had in a given area, such as sports or math, were the kids who never lived up to their potential. Those kids who were not given a "potential" to live up to were often the ones who did really well.

What Dr. Dweck's research shows is that praising an ability contributes to creating what she calls a "fixed mindset," which is a belief that our intelligence and abilities are something we are just born with, and cannot be changed. On the contrary, those with a "growth mindset" - the intent to learn - do not have this belief. They believe that, through dedication and effort, they can develop their intelligence and abilities - which also develops their self-esteem. As she shows in her excellent book, this has been proven over and over in all walks of life.

So what about praise? As we can see, praising a child for abilities contributes to the child becoming externally defined. This child says, "I get approval when I succeed. My worth is attached to success." This creates a fear of not succeeding and therefore not being worthy, which not only limits what the child tries to do, but also limits the enjoyment of it. The child is no longer learning for the joy of it, but for the approval, and will stop trying if it appears that he or she is not going to succeed. Failure, to this child, means, "I am a failure."

On the other hand, those children praised for effort rather than for abilities learn to be internally defined. They keep their natural enjoyment of learning. They are excited by the prospect of a challenge because they are unattached to the outcome of success or failure. Failure just means that they will try harder. Success or failure doesn't define their worth as a person.

A major way of supporting your children's self-esteem is to praise their efforts rather than their abilities.

## **Validating vs. Indulging Children's Feelings**

By Dr. Margaret Paul

**As parents, we want to let our children know that their feelings are valid, and at the same time we do not want to indulge them in using their feelings to manipulate. In this article, learn to discern the difference between authentic feelings and manipulative feelings, and how to handle each.**

I grew up at a time when children's feelings were not important. I was supposed to go along with the program without complaint, regardless of how I felt. If I was upset about something, my mother generally responded with, "Don't be ridiculous," while my father just ignored me. Many of my counseling clients had similar experiences in their growing-up years.

Those of us on a personal growth path don't want to do the same thing to our children. We want our children to feel safe in expressing their feelings. We want them to know that what they feel matters to us, that their feelings are important to us. The problem is that sometimes

children use their feelings to manipulate their parents, and parents sometimes get confused between validating their children's authentic feelings and indulging the feelings intended to manipulate.

All feelings are not created equal. As parents, we need to learn to discern the difference in intent regarding our children's expression of feelings. Authentic feelings are generated by life experiences, such as the loss of a pet, difficulties with friends, problems with learning, and so on. These feelings need to be attended to with caring and compassion. Manipulative feelings are generated by thoughts such as, "I want attention," "I want new clothes," or "I have a right to have whatever I want." The expression of these feelings needs to be ignored, or the child needs to be told that we don't like the complaining, so that we are not indulging our children in using their feelings to manipulate.

Joanne is struggling with her six-year-old daughter, Rachael, regarding this issue of feelings. "I don't want to squash her feelings the way mine were squashed." However, Rachael has learned to use her feelings to control Joanne. For example, Rachael often cries bitterly in the mornings while getting dressed for school because she can't seem to find the right combination of clothes. Joanne then spends a lot of time trying to help Rachael. Mornings have become a nightmare. The same thing happens regarding food. If Joanne doesn't have the food Rachael wants, or if Rachael doesn't like the meal Joanne has prepared, Rachael often complains and carries on. If Joanne and her husband Dan want to go out alone or with friends for dinner, Rachael is outraged at being left out. Joanne consistently validates Rachael's feelings by saying things like, "I really understand how you feel," or "I really understand that this is important to you."

However, in continuing to attend to Rachael's feelings and giving them so much of her time, Joanne is indulging Rachael and teaching her to use her feelings as a form of control. In addition, Joanne is not helping Rachael learn to manage her feelings, but rather to dump them on others. Just because we feel something doesn't mean we need to act on the feelings. As adults, just because we may feel like having ice cream for breakfast, doesn't mean we indulge ourselves in having it. Just because we feel like sleeping in when we need to go to work doesn't mean we allow our feelings to determine our behavior. Just because we feel like punching someone in the nose doesn't mean we do it. Hopefully, we've learned to acknowledge and release our feelings without letting them control us.

The same needs to be true with our children. We need to learn to comfort our children's authentic feelings, such as the pain over the loss of a friendship, while not giving much attention to feelings expressed as a means of control. When Joanne takes responsibility for fixing Rachael's feelings, Rachael does not have to learn to take care of her own, which undermines her self-esteem. Joanne needs to walk away from or ignore Rachael's tantrums and complaints when they are about things like her clothes or food. She needs to let Rachael know that, while she understands her feelings, Rachael also needs to learn to accept things as they are. Accepting how things are is part of learning to manage feelings.

If Joanne wants Rachael to grow up with good values and a sense of intrinsic self-worth, she needs to not give energy to issues such as the clothes. Indulging Rachael in thinking the right clothes are important for her sense of worth is not good for Rachael. Indulging Rachael in controlling whether or not she is included in adult activities is also not good for Rachael. Rachael needs to learn to accept things even if she doesn't like them - we all need to learn this. By indulging Rachael's manipulative behavior through giving all of her feelings so much importance, Joanne is creating a child with entitlement issues.

Before we can help our children manage their feelings in healthy ways, we need to learn to manage our own feelings in healthy ways. If you are indulgent with your feelings, your children will learn to do the same. If you are using your feelings to manipulate others, or allowing others to manipulate you with their feelings, your children will learn this from you. One of the best things you can do for your children is to practice Inner Bonding and become a role model for taking personal responsibility for your feelings. Taking responsibility for your feelings is a major part of what creates your self-esteem, and taking responsibility for their feelings is a major part of what creates your children's self-esteem.