

# PARENTS AND CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM

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*My main objective in this article is to give practical tips and suggestions to parents on how to help children increase their self-esteem.*

## Case 1

Assessed as dyslexic, twelve-year-old Gordon can hardly read and write, a situation, which is negatively affecting his self-esteem. He has become rebellious, and anger is building up inside him. His parents are very understanding, they praise and support him, but nothing seems to work and they are at a loss.

## Case 2

Julie is a beautiful thirteen-year-old young lady. She is very well mannered but extremely shy. She is assessed as a high flyer in school, but unfortunately has no friends at all. Her peers call her a nerd mainly because they think that she studies all the time, and because they know that her mother wants her to be first in everything. Mrs Borg wants her daughter to be the ideal child ... Julie can never meet her mother's over-ambitious demands. Although she doesn't show it, Julie is really frustrated because she thinks she is no good and can never be successful.

Like Gordon, but for different reasons, Julie suffers from low self-esteem as is the case with a number of other young people her age. Neither Gordon nor Julie feel good about themselves, and they do not believe they are capable of dealing with everyday challenges. They are tortured with self-doubt and self-distrust and therefore let others take decisions for them.

Children with high self-esteem are quite different from Gordon and Julie. They know and believe that their parents and other adults and peers accept them as they are, care for them, love them, criticise them constructively and respect their decisions. Such children are very lucky because they have the necessary confidence in their own strengths and abilities. They live in an environment, which helps them to generate self-esteem from within.

Apart from the atmosphere existing at home and the relationship of the child with the parents, many factors in our culture may have an effect on a person's self-esteem, starting with physical appearance, acceptance by adults and peers, as well as achievements, whether in sports, schooling, or in any other area that is significant to that particular person.

### **Case 3**

Filippa is a thirteen-year-old; she does very well in school, and her parents love her a great deal. However, she is very unhappy because she thinks she is ugly, a fact which is greatly affecting her self-esteem. Her parents feel desperate every time they hear her sobbing silently in her room.

The causes for low self-esteem can be various, and one cannot generalise because each case has to be studied on its own merits. Consequences too can be various, ranging from shyness to anti-social behaviour such as vandalism and alcohol or drug abuse. Teenagers who suffer from low self-esteem generally find it difficult to accept themselves and establish their identity. They fantasise and daydream, and yearn to be someone else, a symptom, which does not augur well for the healthy development of their personality.

In view of these serious consequences, parents should know what they can do to help their children develop a healthy sense of self-esteem. Since birth they have to show them love, and pass on a clear message that they care for them. In turn, children will develop strong feelings of security because they know they are wanted, appreciated and loved. Moreover, parents should help children mix with their peers and belong to a group. Being accepted by the group, adjusting to it, and building healthy relationships with peers, gives the child a strong feeling of belonging, and hence, increases self-esteem.



Parents should help children mix with their peers and belong to a group.

[Nikolai Astrup (Summer Breeze and Children at Play)]

Parents should praise children, but without overdoing it. Flattery backfires; it is not a short cut to increasing children's self-esteem because they can easily detect the artificiality of the situation. More effective than merely praising, is to appreciate your child's achievement and the effort that went into it. For example it would be very effective to say something like the following to a child who passed an examination: "Well done Thomas, you really deserved to pass because you worked hard. I know how many hours you studied instead of watching television. I'm so happy for you." If it is possible, parents should not only praise and appreciate, but also involve themselves in their children's interests. The following will serve as an illustration.

#### **Case 4**

Tonio is a six-year-old who is mad about gardening. He was very pleased with himself after cleaning up the back garden. Albert, his father, not only praised him for a job well done, but helped him plant an orange tree in the middle of the garden.

The message in the above example is very clear indeed. The father's behaviour is telling Tonio that he is important and is taken seriously. Because the feeling of satisfaction is greater, this enhances Tonio's self-esteem. You are really a success if you are considered so by your own father.

Observing Albert in the company of his son Tonio, makes one realise how much Albert has developed basic skills as a father. He not only spends time with his son, but treats him respectfully by asking him for his views and opinions, for example about the colour scheme when painting the house, about a television programme or the performance of players during a football match. It so happens that very often children know that their parents love them, but they are not sure whether they respect them as individuals. When children are talking, parents should listen, stop what they are doing, look at them and take them seriously. They should not brush them off, be impatient or correct them all the time as if they are not allowed to make mistakes. Correcting them all the time or forbidding them to do things "because they don't know how to do them", gives our children the impression that they are stupid and insignificant. We have to accept the fact that our children are individuals, they have to learn in their own way; they are entitled to their own interpretation of facts and ideas. So often do we hear the phrase in Maltese "Int ma tifhemx", which is indirectly telling our children that they are almost worthless and that we do not respect their feelings. This surely will not help to increase their self-esteem or to strengthen our relationship with them. On the other hand Albert's attitude will definitely help Tonio to cope with occasional defeats such as not getting the desired mark at school. On such occasions Albert explains to his son that life has its ups and downs and sometimes we are not very successful. But a less-than-sterling performance does not mean we are a failure, either. Tonio knows that if one of his compositions is assessed as a 'C' or a 'D', this won't affect his father's love for him. This is very important for keeping unshaken Tonio's

self-worth and self-confidence, hence his self-esteem. It is the parents' duty to make evident to the child that their love is unconditional and not pivotal on academic success or other particular achievements.

Albert's policy is to help his son develop his strengths and live through experiences successfully, taking reasonable risks at times in order to provide opportunities for growth. Albert knows that success, however small, will increase his son's self-esteem.

Unfortunately not all parents have the necessary skills to help their children develop self-esteem. Labelling children, calling them names and / or comparing them with peers won't help. It makes the child bitter and destroys his self-respect. "If my own kind say that I'm stupid, if they do not accept me for what I am, then I'm not worth being loved." There lie the seeds of self-destruction.

I started this article with the case of twelve-year-old Gordon. Hundreds of others with learning problems go through experiences of repeated failure, frustration and continuous un-rewarded efforts. This situation undermines self-confidence. In these circumstances parents should have a plan of how to help the child preserve his or her self-esteem.

### **Case 5**

To say the least, fifteen-year-old Moira's academic achievements are by no means average and she often fails her examinations. Her parents had a long talk with Moira, with the guidance teacher and with the head of school. They all helped her to set realistic academic goals, namely to concentrate on five subjects and be satisfied with a 'D' grade. Her parents support and encourage her; her mother went so far as to admit that she herself had to struggle all along her school life in order to keep up with her peers. Little by little Moira is accepting her situation, and her self-esteem has been boosted particularly since she became a member of a youth movement. She feels more independent, her circle of friends has grown bigger, and Moira has come to realise that although her academic achievements are very important, life is made up of many other facets.

Parents should remember that children do not grow up in a vacuum. As the maxim goes, parents have to give children roots to grow and wings to fly. These roots have to be watered with an abundance of love and respect. This will help our children become emotionally healthy, happy and successful young people. In their teenage years they will manage to find themselves, accept who they are and become independent. This means they establish their identity and later develop into mature and productive members of the community.