

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN CHILDREN

by Dr. Abraham Twerski

Whenever I lecture on self-esteem, I am invariably asked, "What can we do to give our children self-esteem?" Many parents notice that even their young children have self-esteem problems. My answer is that self-esteem is contagious. Parents who feel secure, confident and good about themselves will pass that feeling on to their children. Parents who are anxious, insecure and have low self-esteem are likely to pass that feeling on to their children. Therefore, to help your children attain self-esteem, develop your own self-esteem.

I also recommend a book by Dr. Patricia Berne, [Building Self-Esteem in Children](#). It is an excellent book, but I take issue with Dr. Berne on one point. She says that "if you have given your children self-esteem, you have given them everything. If you have not given them self-esteem, then whatever else you may have given them has little value." My disagreement with her is that you cannot give your children self-esteem, any more than you can give them happiness. You can only provide them with the love, care and environment that is conducive to self-esteem. You can give them the building blocks, but they have to develop self-esteem by themselves.

Parenting a child is the most important thing we will do in our lives. Parenting is a skill, and in today's world in which children face unprecedented challenges, parenting requires great skill.

We are not all born intuitive parents, nor can we rely on raising our children the way our parents raised us. The world is changing rapidly and previous techniques may not be adequate. It is crucial that young parents-to-be learn parenting skills before they have to apply them.

There are a variety of theories on parenting, and each authority feels his method is most effective. There is really no way to determine which one is best. What is most important is that both parents agree on a particular method and apply it consistently. Children caught between two different methods, or inconsistent parents, may be confused and unable to develop a proper course in life.

Parenting for self-esteem is somewhat like walking a tightrope. There is not too much room for deviation in either direction. If children are not allowed to exercise their decision-making skills because the parents do everything for them, they may never develop self-confidence. If children receive no guidance and teaching, they may grow up without a sense of responsibility and dignity.

Parents took their six-year-old son to a restaurant. After taking the parents' orders, the waitress turned to the child, "And what will you have?"

The child responded, "Two hot dogs with lots of mustard and a coke."

The mother smiled to the waitress and said, "You can bring him roast beef with mashed potatoes and vegetables."

The waitress returned with the parents' orders, and in front of the child she set two hot dogs and a coke. The mother was horrified, but the child grinned from ear to ear and said, "Look, Mommy! She thinks I'm real."

Parents must give their children an opportunity to feel that they are real, and that they are people, very much a part of the family, but distinct entities in their own right. Children should be permitted to make age-appropriate decisions. Their feelings should be respected, and yes, even their right to privacy should be respected.

Respecting a child's feelings means realizing that a child has the right to have feelings. There are some feelings that we consider objectionable, and it is only if we recognize that the child has these feelings that we can help him cope with them and redirect them, wherever possible, to constructive channels.

How should you react if a child expresses a desire for something treife [not kosher]? "I could sure go for one of those burgers." Would you say to him, "What a terrible thing to say! No good Jewish child would think that way?"

If so, then you are at odds with the Talmud that I cited earlier that says that, "A person should not say, 'I do not want pork.' Rather, one should say, 'I do want pork, but my Father in Heaven has forbidden it' " (cited in Rashi, Leviticus 20:26). Condemning a child for feelings over which he has no control is giving him the notion that he is inherently bad. Rather, this is an opportunity for a parent to explain to the child that there may be many things we may desire, but inasmuch as we live by the Will of God as revealed in the Torah, we may not have some things that we desire.

But what if a child says, "I hate mommy!" Should the response be, "That's terrible! Hate is an awful feeling. You should never hate anyone, and certainly not your mother"? The child has a negative feeling toward mommy, if only because she refused to buy him the candy or toy that he wanted. The fact is that the child does not hate mommy, but is using the word "hate" to express his anger at her, because he does not know any other words to use. This may be an opportunity to tell the child, "I don't think you really hate mommy. I think what you mean is that you are very angry with her. You know, sometimes you do things which may make me angry, but even when I'm angry at you, I still love you very much."

(By the way, do not assume that words that children use mean the same thing to them as they do to you. Try to find out just what the child means by a word he uses. Just as "I hate" may really mean "I'm angry," the expression "I wish he were dead" is not the horrible thing you may take it to mean. The child may have no idea what "dead" means, and may be saying only, "I wish he would go away for a

while.")

You may then try to explain to the child that there are times when daddy and mommy will not give him what he wants because they know it is not good for him. You understand that this may make him angry, but that as parents, you must do what is best for him. The child may not grasp this or agree with it, but you have validated the fact that he has a negative feeling, and even that you can understand why a juvenile mind would feel that way.

I'm not sure that even if a child's feeling is "hate," that the parent has a right to simply condemn it. The mitzvah "Do not hate your brother in your heart" (Leviticus 19:17) is unfortunately not universally observed even by adults. A parent should do some serious soul-searching to find whether he has eradicated all residuals of hatred within himself as the Torah requires.

We teach our children best by modeling. If a child can become aware that the parent does not hate anyone, there is a much better chance that he can be helped to overcome this feeling. Rather than denying the child's feeling, the parent may help him understand why hatred is a destructive feeling, and that he should try to overcome it. The parent will first have to have recourse to the *mussar* [personal growth] writings that teach how to eliminate hatred in himself. These teachings may be beyond what a child can understand, but if the parent succeeds at this, he can better convey it to the child.

If a child's perception of reality is dismissed as incorrect, he may lose confidence in his ability to make judgments. When father and mother have a loud interchange, and the child says, "Why were you and Daddy fighting?" it is foolish to say, "Daddy and Mommy were not fighting." Rather, you might say, "Daddy and Mommy were disagreeing on something, and just got carried away and shouted instead of talking. But Daddy and Mommy always make-up" (or I hope they do). Of course, Daddy and Mommy should learn how to disagree without shouting at each other.

Obviously, children require discipline. Parents should learn effective ways of disciplining without shaming or ridiculing the child. I must repeat a personal experience that I have related elsewhere. When my father disapproved of something I did, he would say in Yiddish, "*Es past nisht*" (That does not become you. It is beneath your dignity). I was not told that I was bad, but rather that what I did was inappropriate for someone as good as me.

Children need positive strokes. We "catch" our children doing wrong things. The good things they do may be taken for granted. We should make an effort to "catch" our children doing right things at least three times a day and commend them for it.

A five-year-old girl was given a new jump rope, and she proceeded to try to jump. Her parents clapped loudly at her performance and then went on to do their things. A bit later, the child approached her parents, saying, "I think I can do it, but I need more clapping."

Parents must be careful not to "use" their children. When I see a two-year-old wearing designer

clothes, I wonder if these were bought because of their quality or because the parents wanted others to see that their child was wearing designer clothes. Whereas designer clothes for a two-year-old is rather innocent, insisting on what school the son or daughter must attend because of its prestige for the parents, or what family he or she must marry into to suit the parents' social standing, is far from innocent.

Parents must make an effort to know their children, to know their talents and strengths and to help the child maximize his/her unique potential. Children should not be demanded to do something beyond their physical and psychological maturation.

In my early days as a rabbi, I prepared boys for Bar-Mitzvah. There was one boy who was absolutely tone-deaf. I had no idea how he would ever chant the Haftarah. The father insisted that he must be the chazzan (reader), and when the boy said that he couldn't, the father shouted, "What's the matter with you? Don't you want to be a Jew?"

Hopefully, most parents exercise much better intelligence and judgment, but sometimes a parent may not be aware why the child does not perform up to his expectations. A father who had hoped that his son would be a sports athlete may be bitterly disappointed if the child cannot hit or catch a ball. In such a case, it is the father who must correct unrealistic expectations, and encourage the child to develop the skills he does possess.

Children did not ask to be brought into the world. The parents who brought them into the world owe them the best shot at developing themselves to the fullest and, within the parents' means, the best opportunities to achieve self-esteem and happiness.

Although we cannot expect young children to keep a journal, we can help them make use of some of the suggestions I made. For example, in the evening, ask the child about the events of the day. Sometimes you might ask, "What did you like best about today?" or "Was there anything you didn't like today?" These are openings to give a child the opportunity to look at the positives and a chance to get help with the negatives. To do this, parents must set aside some time to talk with the child, which is in itself a good self-esteem builder.

A very simple way to help children build their self-esteem is for the family to eat together. In "Family Meals May Prevent Teen Problems," APA Monitor, 28 (10), 8, Oct. 1997, the researchers found that the best readers from elementary through high school came from families that ate their meals together. These children develop more extensive vocabularies at an earlier age, are better equipped to articulate, and score two to three grade levels higher on standardized reading tests. The family mealtime created a sense of belonging and allowed parents to keep abreast of what was going on with their children.

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An excerpt from Dr. Twerski's new book "Ten Steps to Being Your Best" available at artscroll.com.