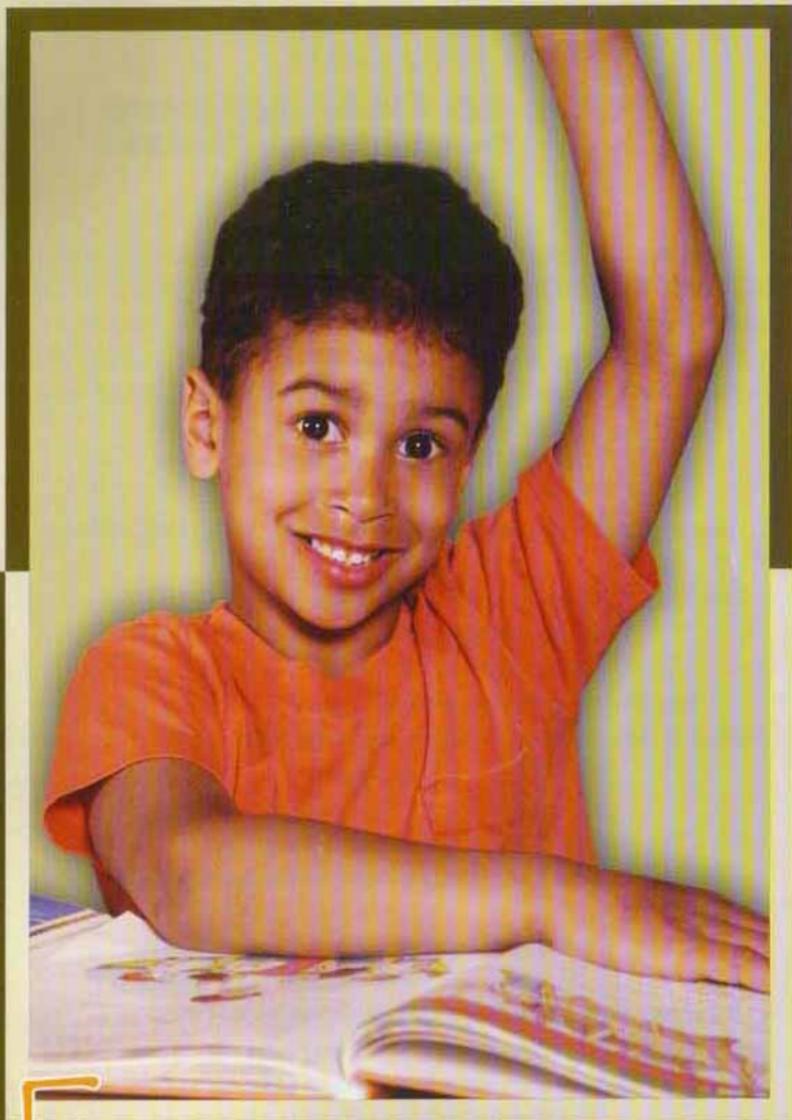


The **PARENTING FOR LIFE SERIES** Presents:



Focus on **Self-Esteem**
Nurturing your school-age child

PARENTING FOR LIFE
Presents:
Focus on Self-Esteem
Nurturing your school-age child

Focus on Self-Esteem is the fifth in a series of booklets from the PARENTING FOR LIFE education program. PARENTING FOR LIFE is an award-winning, non-profit education program promoting positive parenting skills and the well-being of families. This unique initiative includes booklets and posters prepared by the writers and editors of Today's Parent in collaboration with The Psychology Foundation of Canada.

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Kodak

FIRST WORDS

Why is self-esteem so important? Parents hear about self-esteem constantly. It comes up so often in discussions about children's well-being because high self-esteem has an impact on just about every aspect of our lives: learning, relationships, health, career and overall life satisfaction. People with positive self-esteem tend to have happier, more productive lives.

We all have ideas about what self-esteem means, but how it develops is a bit of a mystery. Some people who seem like they should have great self-esteem don't have it, while others, who on the surface don't have much success, still have strong self-esteem.

How does this happen? What role do parents play? How can we continue to help our children develop self-esteem as they get older and come under the influence of people outside the home?

We hope you'll take the time to explore these and other important questions with us.

*We would like to thank the members of the Advisory Committee of The Psychology Foundation of Canada, who shared their expertise with us during the development and design of **Focus on Self-Esteem**:*

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Focus on Self-Esteem

Nurturing your school-age child

By John Hoffman

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WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Self-Esteem Defined

What is self-esteem and where does it come from? To begin, let's explore the roots of self-esteem and how it develops throughout childhood.

What is Self-Esteem?

To most people, having high self-esteem means that you value yourself as a person, that you like yourself and like being who you are. And that's a good place to start. But let's look at self-esteem more closely.

Generally speaking, people with high self-esteem:

- are able to realistically recognize their personal strengths and needs, and are comfortable with themselves as they are
- enjoy and get along with other people but also enjoy their own company (solitude) at times
- are confident about trying new challenges or opportunities and will take appropriate risks
- are able to think for themselves, without always requiring the approval of others
- feel good about their skills and accomplishments, but can deal productively with frustration
- can handle the normal tasks and challenges that life has to offer

Remember, everyone experiences ups and down in life. Even with high self-esteem, nobody has all of these qualities, all of the time!

Where Does Self-Esteem Come From?

In infancy, a child's self-esteem begins to develop through her parents' nurturing. The comforting, affection and care they give her tells the baby, "You are loveable and important, just because you are you." *Your unconditional love provides the foundation for your child's self-esteem.*

But self-esteem comes, not just from who we are, but also from what we can do and how we live our lives. That's why you can't "give" children high self-esteem just by saying things like, "There's nobody else exactly like you" or "You're special." Building self-esteem is not as simple as that. As children become more independent and move out into the world, feedback from others and a sense of competence is increasingly important to their self-esteem.

Where does a sense of competence come from? For most people, it emerges in three areas:

- **People:** Human beings are social creatures. Most of us live, work and play in groups, so being able to deal with people effectively – getting along, feeling accepted, enjoying good relationships and friendships – are important human skills.
- **Character:** The positive values and qualities we develop – kindness, perseverance, integrity – can also become an enduring source of self-esteem. It is these qualities that make up our sense of being a "good person."
- **Skills, abilities and accomplishments:** We all need to master the tasks necessary to have an enjoyable and productive life, such as looking after ourselves, having knowledge about our world, being good at our jobs, having athletic, artistic, or musical skills.

Living with Who You Are

Do people who have "a lot going for them" have higher self-esteem? Those who are nice-looking often get a lot of attention. High achievers in school, sports, or work get praised by teachers, coaches, and employers, and those who are popular get recognition from their friends. In these cases, it would seem easier to feel good about yourself. Yet people can have top-level abilities and still have low overall self-esteem.

That's because being highly skilled or popular is only part of what goes into self-esteem. The feelings we have about ourselves and our own worth are more complex than that.

Somehow as we learn new skills and try to improve on those we already have, we also need to be content and comfortable with who and what we are right now.

It's like a circle: Our achievements and abilities affect how we see ourselves, and how we see ourselves also affects how we feel about our achievements. The two will always be connected.

What Self-Esteem is Not

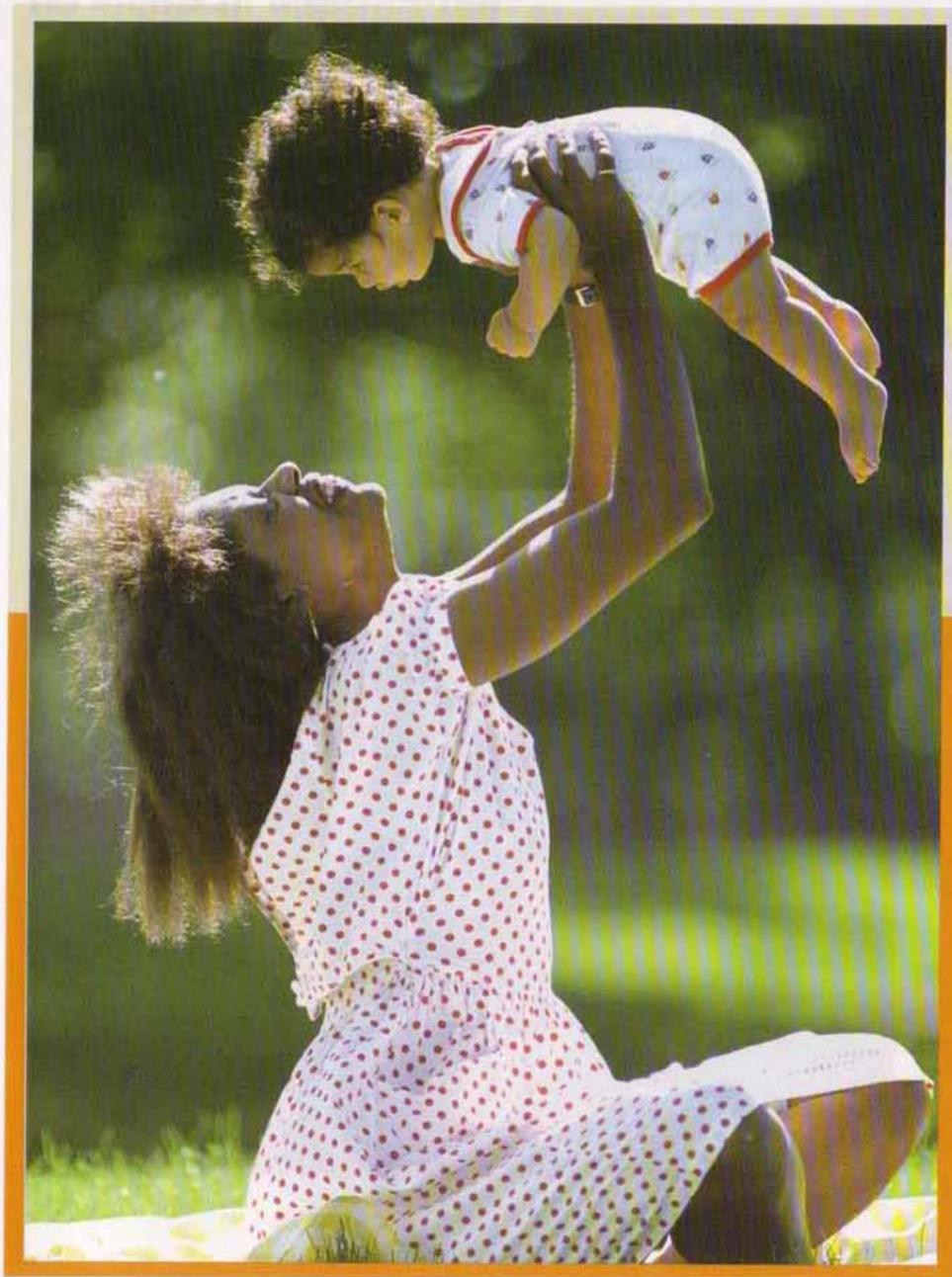
High self-esteem does not mean:

- Feeling happy all the time
- Believing that you are better or more important than everybody else
- Believing you are (or should be) "great" in all areas of life - like athletics, academics, work, beauty or social skills

The Wonderful Amazing Baby

"Where's my little guy?"

Jeremy always wants to see his baby, Jesse, as soon as he gets home from work. "I think he's just waking up from his nap," Sarah says. Jeremy walks over and sneaks a peek in the stroller. The two-month-old is awake, lying there contentedly. Jeremy smiles. Jesse smiles back - one of those irresistible baby smiles. His face lights up, his arms and legs start going and his whole body wriggles with excitement. Jeremy is totally captivated. He's thinking, "What a wonderful amazing baby you are." Jesse sees that in his dad's face. He feels... wonderful and amazing.



Self-Esteem in Children

So far, we have been talking mostly about what adults with good self-esteem are like. Children are different. *As they grow up, their self-esteem is in a constant state of development.* It can vary from one age or situation to the next, and the important issues change and evolve as a child gets older.

So a child's self-esteem isn't a single thing that he either has or doesn't have. It may be high on the basketball court and low in math class, or strong at age ten and a little shaky heading into the teen years. As parents, we see these changes in our own children, and that can make it hard to know the best way to nurture their self-esteem.



How Developmental Stages Affect Self-Esteem

A parent's role in fostering good self-esteem changes as children go through various stages of development.

With babies, as we've noted, it's fairly simple. Self-esteem is all about connectedness, trust, and unconditional love. Newborn babies don't have a sense of who they are. They learn who they are, and that they are worthwhile, from us, their parents, through the way we interact with them.

Young children continue to depend on the feedback of parents for their sense of self-worth. Parents delight in every milestone – the first step, the first word, the first tower built from two blocks. The toddler still thinks: "I am the centre of the universe. I must be somebody very worthwhile if Mom and Dad think that what I do is this great."

As children grow into toddlers and preschoolers, we still love them unconditionally, but we expect more of them. We expect them to learn new skills and to begin to behave in certain ways. When they do, we show our approval, and when they don't, we may show disapproval. They learn that some of the esteem that Mom and Dad have for them is earned.

When children go off to school, they are exposed to a much wider world. There is a teacher who has expectations for their behaviour and learning. The teacher evaluates them. They are in a class with many other children, and those kids evaluate each other. They start to compare themselves to those other children – to evaluate themselves. Now Mom or Dad's opinion is not the only thing that matters anymore.

This is when self-esteem, and our role in it, becomes more complex. *We need to help our children begin to develop an inner self-esteem that will help them to deal with criticism, failure, and disappointment as well as success and approval.*

What if I Think My Child Has Low Self-Esteem?

There is no quick and easy way to tell whether or not your child has self-esteem that is low enough to be a problem.

However, there are some things to keep in mind as you think it through.

- Don't jump to catastrophic conclusions. Remember that self-esteem fluctuates throughout childhood and can temporarily dip when youngsters move into a new developmental phase or a new situation. Transitions can be challenging for children.
- Is it a global problem or a situational one? If a child's problem seems to be in one area, like school, it may be worth investigating to see if there's a specific problem that could be resolved. If the problem occurs only in an optional activity, consider taking the child out of that activity.
- Note situations where your child feels good about herself. Make sure she gets many chances to be in those situations.
- Remember that your positive relationship with your child is more important than ever right now.
- Be patient and have courage. Children are more resilient than we sometimes think and good self-esteem is built up gradually, not quickly.
- Don't be afraid to seek help if the situation persists and gets worse. If you're wrong and things are fine, at least you'll know that you can relax a bit. If your child truly needs help, you'll know you've done the right thing.

Where Do Parents Fit In?

Parents play a very important role as their children develop self-esteem, but we should realize that parents cannot control all the factors that influence self-esteem.

We don't control what our children look like or the temperament they were born with. And although we can help children learn and practise skills, we do not control their natural talents and abilities.

How, then, can we influence our children's self-esteem in positive ways?

- We can show them that we always love, value and respect them as people even when we do not always approve of their behaviour.
 - We can communicate with them respectfully and positively.
- We can work to maintain a close relationship with them as they grow older.
 - We can treat each of our children as individuals and avoid comparing them to each other.
- We can encourage them to improve their skills and develop new ones. We can teach them to value effort and learning, how to solve problems and how to deal with frustration without hurting themselves or others.
 - We can teach them to learn from mistakes.
- We can communicate and model the importance of values like kindness, helping others, and making a contribution.
- We can give them age-appropriate responsibilities and opportunities to make their own decisions, so they can see how their own choices and efforts can make a difference.
- We can show them, by our example, how adults with healthy self-esteem act.

All of these are good tools for building children's self-esteem.

Seize the Moment

Tanya was bringing Camilo up to date after his return from a business trip.

"I had a hard time with Rosa," she began. "It seemed like the whole time you were away I was nagging her to do something – homework, picking up clothes, feeding the dog. She was very uncooperative. I felt like we were always mad at each other. Then last night, she asked if we could make some brownies. At first I said no, because we already had muffins and she had homework and I had laundry to fold. Then I thought, we haven't had any fun together all week. So I said what the heck, why not? Afterwards, she was in such a good mood. It's almost like I forgot how much I like her company. I have to remember to do that more often."

LET'S TALK

Communication Skills for Fostering Self-Esteem

One word ties together almost everything that is important about how parents foster self-esteem in children: communication. Positive communication is much more than just telling our children that we love them, or that we think they are great. It's what we do as well as what we say. How we spend time together, how we discipline, how we support our kids in good times and bad, all have an effect on self-esteem.

Staying Connected

Positive parent/child communication begins with a strong connection.

When our children are babies and toddlers, their dependence on us provides a built-in way to foster a close relationship. As they start spending more time at school and with friends, it takes more conscious effort to maintain that connection. It may seem that we are less important to them, but the parent/child relationship is still the anchor that secures a child's self-esteem. Staying connected helps us to tune into our children's feelings. That's very important, because how children feel about themselves is central to their self-esteem.

It's important to look for little ways to stay in touch at key points during the day. Eating meals together, driving them to activities, and bedtime are good starting places. Sometimes, though, we get so caught up in getting through the day and moulding a little human being – correcting and monitoring behaviour, making sure that homework is done, balanced meals are eaten and teeth are brushed – that we forget to just enjoy our children as they are right now. Yet simply having fun together is a powerful way to connect.

Some kids are more challenging to raise than others (perhaps because of their temperament or conditions like ADHD), and all kids have stages where they are more difficult to get along with. Finding ways to simply enjoy each other's company is even more important when you are experiencing a lot of parent-child conflict or frustration.

Helpful Feedback

Parents give their children lots of feedback: advice, instruction, praise and criticism. Feedback can help youngsters see what they are good at and also how to improve. However, *some kinds of praise and criticism are more helpful than others to children's self-esteem.*

Consider this comment:

"You were such a good boy at the store. I love you!"

It's nice to tell our children we love them, but we don't want to give the message that we love them only because of the good things they do. They need to know that we love them always. And while it's important to notice and appreciate our children's positive actions, "good boy" doesn't really tell a child much. When we give more specific feedback, it helps children to recognize, value and develop their own admirable qualities:

"Marla, I saw what happened in the front yard when those girls were calling Cayleigh names. I was really proud of the way you told them to leave her alone. And they stopped. If you hadn't have done that, Cayleigh would have felt even worse. It's not easy to stand up to other kids like that to help your friend. It takes courage. I admire that."

"I Can't Do It" – A Conversation Gone Wrong

Chantal slammed down her piano book. "This piece is too hard. I'll never get it in time for the recital!"

Her father was worried. He knew how badly Chantal would feel if she messed up at the recital.

"Sure you will. Now just calm down. All you have to do is work harder. Try it one more time."

"What good will that do? I'm telling you I can't play this!"

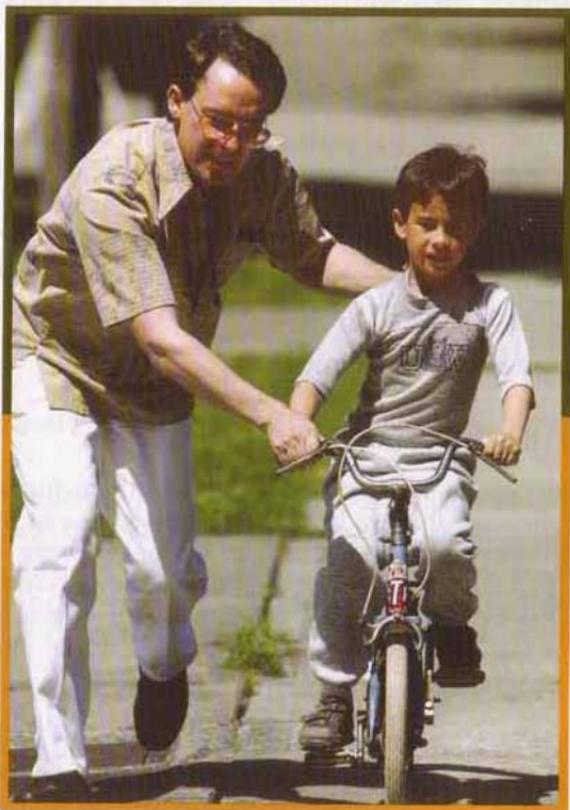
"Chantal! Crying isn't going to get you anywhere!"

"What do you know? Just leave me alone!" shouted Chantal.

Children feel the way they feel whether we like it or not. Chantal's father wasn't accepting the reality of her feelings, and that's why she reacted so negatively to his suggestion.

Dealing with Frustration

Sometimes, when children are frustrated and upset, we get frustrated ourselves and want to fix it as quickly as possible. It's almost like we want to talk them out of feeling bad. But that can backfire. We end up mad at them for feeling bad, and they feel worse because we're mad at them.



What children need to learn is that frustration is a normal part of learning and that we can help them deal with it. We can't take away all the obstacles, nor should we because learning how to overcome obstacles is very important to the development of self-esteem. But we can help, by showing:

- that we understand and accept how they feel
- that we know (even if they don't) that they will feel better later
- that we are there to help when they are ready to talk about how to overcome their problem
- that we believe that they will eventually be able to overcome their problem

Helping Children with Self-Evaluation

We've mentioned that as children reach school age they begin to evaluate themselves: to assess their own characteristics and abilities against those of other children. The trouble is, they don't always evaluate themselves accurately, so they can be pretty hard on their own self-esteem. For example, they may make a sweeping negative conclusion about themselves, when the real issue is a specific problem we can help them to identify and resolve.

When a child declares, "I'm no good at..." something, it seldom helps to contradict him. *But if you can help him make a more realistic assessment, of both his trouble areas and his strengths, it may turn an overwhelming problem into something manageable.*

"I Can't Do It" – A Parent's Support

"I'll never be able to ride this bike!" Paolo threw his helmet down in disgust.

Elvira tried to stay calm. She knew her son became frustrated easily and it bothered her to see him like this. But she had learned that, with Paolo, it was wise to wait for the right moment to offer help. "You've had a tough time with this. Learning to ride a bike can be really frustrating."

"I hate that bike," Paolo said. He continued complaining and crying for several minutes, while Elvira listened quietly. After a while she said, "This is really making you upset. Let's do something else now. You can tell me when you're ready to try again. I know you're going to get it sooner or later."

"No Good at Math"

"I keep getting the wrong answer," said eight-year-old Monika.

"I'm no good at math!"

"Math can be hard sometimes," said her mom, Johanna. "Do you mind showing me your homework?"

As soon as Johanna saw the first question, she knew what the problem was.

Monika's columns weren't lined up properly on the page so she sometimes added the wrong numbers. But instead of pointing out Monika's messy printing, Johanna tried a different approach.

"Can you add these numbers for me? $3 + 4 + 2$?"

"That's easy. 9," said Monika.

"Oh, good," said her mom. "I see that you can add. O.K. Let's look at the next column. What numbers should you add?"

Monika puzzled, " $2 + 5$ plus... I'm not sure if I should add that 4 or the 3."

"I have an idea," Johanna said. She drew three vertical lines on the page to mark the columns. "Try writing the question down again." Monika wrote the numbers in the columns that Johanna had drawn. This time she got the right answer. Monika learned that when her columns were lined up properly, her math skills were actually pretty good.

You're the Model

It's not only what we say to our children that matters. How we act is important. Our children learn a lot by watching how we deal with our own self-esteem issues.



- Try to avoid making sweeping negative statements about yourself ("How can I be so stupid?") when you are upset. Instead talk about how you feel and if possible, convey the idea that you know that feeling bad is temporary. "It was awful losing my car keys today. I had to wait an hour for someone to open the car. I'm sure glad it's over now."
- When you encounter an obstacle, let your child see how you plan to overcome it. "I guess I'd better go down to the hardware store to get some new keys made. And I'm going to keep an extra key in my wallet from now on so I don't get locked out again."
- When you do something well, tell your child how you feel about it. "Man, that painting was a lot of work! The new colour looks great, though, doesn't it?"
- Be mindful of how you treat your spouse/partner and other family members and friends, and demonstrate respect for their self-esteem.
- Apologize when you're wrong. There's a saying from an old movie: "Love means never having to say you're sorry." That's about as wrong as wrong can be. A person with good self-esteem owns up to his mistakes and apologizes when appropriate. Our children need to see us do this.

Discipline that Harms

"Watch the way you hold the pitcher. No, not like that. GANESH!"

Too late. The milk poured off the table and on to the floor.

"Oh, great!" said Ganesh's mother, Surina. "This is just what I need right now! I wanted to enjoy my cup of coffee but now I have to clean up your spill. You never pay attention. I wonder if you're capable of learning anything!"

"Sorry, Mom."

Sorry?! Sorry doesn't cut it, Buster. Go to your room. I don't want to see you for the rest of the afternoon."

This kind of discipline is not helpful to self-esteem, or learning for that matter. Ganesh's mother criticizes him personally, not his behaviour. She seems more interested in punishing him than in correcting what's wrong. That's not discipline, that's revenge.

Discipline and Self-Esteem

Parents sometimes worry that discipline will damage their children's self-esteem. When children are disciplined, they often get very upset. Because we associate self-esteem with feeling happy and discipline with feeling unhappy, it may seem like their self-esteem is suffering.

But positive discipline teaches children how to behave appropriately and ethically – skills and values that will contribute to their sense of self-worth. And feeling bad, in itself, doesn't hurt self-esteem. In a person with good self-esteem, feeling sad, upset or angry can be a perfectly normal response to something that happens. When we are disciplining children, we are often going against their wishes – for example, insisting they do a chore or stop an unacceptable behaviour. They don't usually like that, and that's perfectly understandable. It doesn't hurt kids to feel bad temporarily about a task or consequence.

However, if discipline is very harsh and insults children's human dignity, then it can be damaging to their self-esteem. As parents, our words carry a lot of weight and so we need to be careful about how we talk to children about their misbehaviour.

Let's be realistic. We all lose our temper and say hurtful things to our kids sometimes. But if you find that discipline in your family is consistently associated with humiliation, personal attack, or harsh punishment, you may need to learn some other approaches that have a more positive effect on your children.



Remember: Nobody's Perfect

Are you starting to get the feeling that every time you open your mouth, your child's self-esteem hangs in the balance? That's not true. Everyone blows it sometimes. We get angry, frustrated or tired and say something judgemental or even nasty. Fortunately, little human beings are pretty resilient. They can withstand some mistakes along the way. If your communication with your child is positive, respectful and encouraging most of the time, chances are you are giving him a strong foundation for a lifetime of good self-esteem.

Discipline that Teaches

"Careful pouring that drink."

As she watched the milk hit the floor, Ganesh's mother was annoyed, but she took a deep breath, counted to five and sighed.

"All right. We'll talk about what happened later. Right now we have some cleaning up to do."

"Mom! My favourite TV show is starting!"

"You'll have to miss the first few minutes. I'll get the mop. You get some paper towels and a wet wash cloth."

Ganesh was angry about missing his program, but he went and got the cloth and did his best to sop up milk from the table top, crying all the while.

When they were finished Surina said, "Ganesh, your hands are small. If you want to pour your own drink, you have to hold the pitcher with both hands so you can control it. Either that, or just help yourself to water from the tap. What do you think?"

This time, Surina remains calm. She focuses on the boy's behaviour and on what has to be done to make the situation right again. She's clear about what she expects in the future. Ganesh doesn't like it, but he doesn't feel attacked or put down. In the long run, this kind of positive discipline is good for self-esteem. Why? Because it teaches kids they can correct their mistakes and learn to do better, that we care enough to teach them how to behave, and that they are worthy of respect even when they make mistakes.

BEYOND PARENT AND CHILD

Your Child in the World

Parents are not the only influence on how children feel about themselves. There's a big world out there: friends, activities, school. (For a discussion of school issues, see the next chapter.) How do these affect self-esteem, and what role do parents play?



Friends

Friends are important to everyone. Children want to know that they can make friends, be a friend and that other children like them. As kids enter the preteen years, they want to become more independent from their parents, and they start to sort out questions like: What sort of person am I? Who do I want to be like? What sort of people like me? Friendships play an especially important role at this age.

When children find it hard to make friends, or when they have trouble getting along with their friends, their self-esteem can suffer. Friendship difficulties can happen for different reasons:

The Shy Child

One reason children have trouble making friends is shyness. They are not "joiners" and they feel anxious in social situations which, understandably, makes it harder to make friends. Is shyness related to low-self-esteem? It can be, but shy children can also feel just fine about themselves, especially if their quieter style is accepted by parents and teachers and they have one or two good friends. How can you help?

- Don't remind shy kids that they are shy. They already know.
- Accept your child's shyness. Shyness is largely a temperamental trait – in other words, some people are born that way.
- Help behind the scenes. Shy kids may need extra help to set up play dates and other get-togethers with friends. For example, your child might feel more confident about inviting a new friend over if you help her plan something to do, like a rented video or an outing.
- Look for an organized group activity, like Cubs or a computer club. Some shy children are more comfortable in a structured social situation.
- Understand that your child may find a lot of satisfaction from solitary activities – he may not want or need as much time with friends as his outgoing sister.

Other Barriers to Friendship

Some children have trouble socially because of the way they behave. Children who are aggressive or who have difficulty sharing or "playing fair" often don't understand how their behaviour makes it hard for other children to like them. These children need to learn better social skills, but that kind of learning takes place gradually. Structured recreational activities can be helpful because they offer supervised social situations where children interact together regardless of friendships. Parents and teachers can also help these kids to see the other child's point of view: "How do you think Johnny felt when you pushed him?"

Occasionally, a child with good social skills just doesn't seem to connect with her current classmates. If her passions and interests are a little unusual, she may be more likely find that special friend through a club or activity that brings like-minded kids together.

When children have trouble making friends for any reason, their connection to us becomes all the more important. It shows them that there's at least one place where they are wanted and where they belong.



The Trouble with Friends

As much as we might like to pick the best, most appealing friends for our children, we can't control who our children like – or who likes them. Remember, too, that they are all just kids – subject to the same imperfections and growing pains as our own children. Don't judge them too harshly. *We do need to step in and protect our children if they are being bullied or harassed, but there are many day-to-day ups and downs that children need to work out for themselves.* Sometimes the best thing we can do is to listen without judgement and empathize with their feelings.

Kids and Stress

We often think of stress as something negative, and it can be. However, stress is a normal part of life, and manageable stress can be a positive motivator. When a child does well at sports or enjoys watching a suspenseful movie, part of the what makes the experience rewarding is the stress involved.

Learning to deal with stress and rebound positively from stressful events is crucial to the development of high self-esteem.

Shut Out

"Devin and Marcus started a club and they said I can't join." Jared had come home from school in tears.

His mother, Miriam, could see her son was really hurting. Marcus had been Jared's best buddy, but since he'd become friends with Devin, things had changed. "How can kids be so mean?" she thought. But she kept that to herself. She knew that Marcus's friendship still meant a lot to Jared. And she reminded herself that eight-year-olds can be very fickle.

"I'm sorry they treated you like that. I bet that didn't feel very good."

"No, he said. 'I don't know why they can't let me join.'" Miriam listened quietly while Jared poured out his feelings. When he was finished, Miriam hugged Jared and said, "If I had a club, I'd let you join."

"I know," said Jared. "Maybe I'll start my own club."



Activities

Outside activities like sports, lessons, or recreational clubs give children a chance to make new friends, learn new skills and have some fun. All of these are very good for self-esteem. Activities and lessons can sometimes help a child find that one thing he can be good at or feel passionate about. This can be especially important to a child who is having problems in school. The success he has in an outside activity he enjoys may help him gain confidence in tackling a school project, and should also teach him some lessons about the value of hard work, practice and self-discipline.

A word of caution: It's tempting to think that if something is good, then more of it must be better. That's not always true. These days, some children's lives are so programmed and scheduled that they don't have time to relax and just be kids. All children need plenty of time for free choice and unstructured play.

Extended Family

Parental love is number one with children, but the *love and attention of other caring adults like grandparents, aunts and uncles, can be very important too.* It's a little bit like a self-esteem pool. If a few more people are helping to fill your child's pool, so much the better.

Other adults, like coaches, teachers and camp counsellors, can boost a child's self-esteem, both with their positive attention and by helping the child experience the reward of working for and gaining skills.

Just Me and My Grandma

Angelina loved her special times with Grandma. Sometimes at home, with two brothers and a sister, she felt lost in the shuffle. Her dad worked long hours and her mom had to spend a lot of time looking after the baby. That's why her Thursday after-school visits with Grandma were so important. Grandma wasn't worried about Angelina's homework or what her room looked like. She was happy to do whatever Angelina wanted: playing games, doing crafts, going to the park.

The Karate Kid

"I don't know where Justin would be without karate," his mother was telling her friend. Justin was one of those kids who almost seems to fade into the woodwork. He was an average student. He didn't get picked on by other kids, but he wasn't one of the most popular, either. And his athletic skills were definitely below average. But Justin had found his niche in karate lessons.

"I suggested karate because I thought it would be good for his coordination and fitness, but I had no idea he would become so committed. He's by no means the star student, but he attends regularly, works hard at his levels and last week he got his brown belt. The kids at school were amazed. I'd have never guessed that he'd go that far. He's really proud of himself."

Life's Highs and Lows

We know that building self-esteem is a long-term process and does not depend on single incidents. However, *certain events tend to stand out because, temporarily at least, they have a very noticeable effect on a child's feelings of accomplishment and self-respect* – things like winning a competition or failing a grade in school. It's wise to not make too big a deal out of these events, whether positive or negative.

That doesn't mean you can't enjoy your child's successes – by all means do! But it's best to respond to her excitement, good feelings, and effort, rather than over-emphasizing the achievement itself:

"Dad. I won the high jump at field day today!"

"Hey, great! I'll bet you feel good about that. You've worked really hard at your high jumping."

Similarly, let's not become too upset when something goes wrong or our child fails. In this situation, our children depend on our hopeful leadership. We need to show them (without necessarily saying so) that this is not the end of the world, that life goes on and that we still believe in them.

Jasmine felt heartsick the day the phone call came from the choir director. Two of her daughter's friends had been accepted into the local "all-star" choir, but not Ashley. She cried all afternoon. That night Jasmine and her husband talked it over. "I just wish I could make this better," she said.

"I know," said Dave. "But we can't. I think we just have to help her get over it. She'll find something else to do."

"Yes," said Jasmine. "But I don't think she's ready to hear that right now. Let's give her some time. When she's ready, maybe we can talk to her about joining the choir at school or taking some singing lessons. If she's really serious about being in a good choir we need to encourage her to work hard and keep trying."



THE SCHOOL CONNECTION

The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and School

School is a big part of children's lives. You might say that the relationship between school and self-esteem is a two-way street. Success at school – both academic and social – builds a child's self-esteem. By the same token, children with positive self-esteem are more likely to thrive at school and become active learners. How can parents help?



A Positive Learning Environment

As parents, we hope that school will be a good experience for our children. We can set the stage by creating a home environment that supports and values learning. This begins very early in life.

You were your child's first teacher. You guided, supported and encouraged her as she learned to walk and talk, catch a ball, do puzzles and colour with crayons. You explained things to her, showed her the world, read her stories and taught her how to play games. When she headed off to school, you gave up some of that role to teachers, but you can still continue to support your child's learning at home.

You can also contribute to your child's schooling by showing an interest in his education, attending school events, interacting with his teachers, providing suitable learning materials in the home and helping with homework. *Research has shown that children do better in school when their parents are involved in their education.*

Talking about School

Although we're interested in what's going on at school, it can be hard to find out!

"How was school today?"

"O.K."

How can we have more meaningful conversations with our kids about school? Some suggestions:

- **Watch your timing:** We tend to ask about school as soon as our children come home, but that might be the time when they want a break from school stuff. It might come up naturally while your child is doing homework, or bedtime can be a good time to talk. It's important to be ready to listen when kids are ready to talk.
- **Be specific:** Instead of a general question (that leads to a general answer), try asking about specific parts of your child's day: "What did you do in phys. ed. today? Did you give your speech about Confederation?"
- **Ask for detail:** Questions that require a one-word answer are not the best way to get a conversation going. It might help to try asking questions that require a more detailed answer: "What songs did you sing in the assembly? What was the play about? What was the hardest question on the test?"

Down to a C

When Fatma saw a C on Safi's project, her first impulse was to be angry. She knew he could do better. She thought, "He cares more about video games than school." But she remembered the last time she had argued with Safi about his schoolwork. It hadn't helped and they'd both felt bad. She decided to be more careful this time.

"A C is not bad," she began.
"But your marks used to be better. Did you work hard on this project?"

Safi was quiet for a moment, then said reluctantly, "I guess I kind of did it in a hurry."

"Oh. Did you run out of time with it?" asked Fatma.

"I just forgot," Safi blurted out.
"There are too many different things to do this year, I can't remember it all. I had to do it in one night."

"Your schoolwork is getting more complicated," Fatma pointed out. "Maybe you need a new way of keeping track of your assignments. Would you like me to help you work something out?"

Talking About Grades

How do we react to good – or poor – grades? Again, a sensitive response will both nurture self-esteem and encourage continued efforts.

If a child brings home a good report card and we say, "What a good girl!" the hidden message is that her worth in our eyes depends on her marks in school. However, if we praise her effort and accomplishment instead, it tells her that we admire her achievement, but also that being a good person does not depend on her report card.

"Dad! Look, I got two A's and five B's."

"Let's see? Yes, you did!" said Jason approvingly. "I'll bet you feel good about that. And look what it says here. Your teacher says your effort was excellent. That shows me that you worked really hard. I admire that."

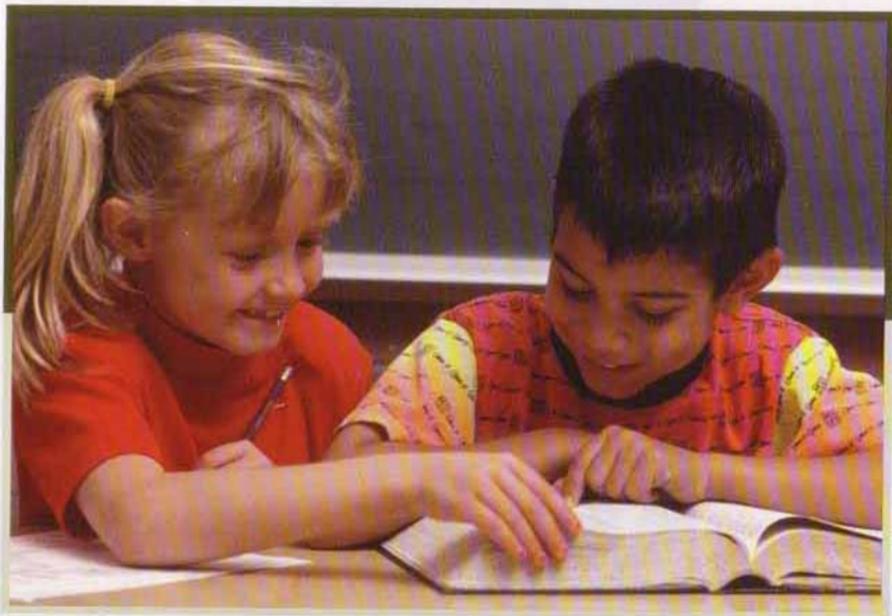
Even when our feedback is negative, there is a way to do it that respects a child's dignity. The key is to stay away from judgements about the child's abilities or character. Instead, give him information about the task or accomplishment in question and try to help him learn from it.

Of course, we would all like to see our child work hard and achieve good marks in school. But realistically, that won't happen for all children. Some kids find school work easy. Others have to work very hard just to achieve a passing grade. *That's why it's important to focus on a child's effort and progress, not just grades.*

Some children, too, are more motivated than others, and while parental support and talented teaching can encourage motivation, we can't make children want to try hard at school. Children who don't find much satisfaction in school achievement often have other passions – perhaps a hobby, sport or skill that really gives them pleasure. It's important to support these interests, too. *The learning and self-confidence a child gains from achieving his own goals are not just good for his self-esteem, but often help him do better in school as well.*

Ups and Downs

We place a lot of importance on school, and rightly so – it's a big part of a child's life and one key to his future success. But we need to remember that school isn't everything. It's not the only place children learn, and the odd negative experience at school – a bad year, or a bad fit with a teacher – won't ruin a child's life or his self-esteem. *When parents communicate well with teachers and support learning in the home, children have the best chance to have a positive educational experience that contributes to their self-esteem.*

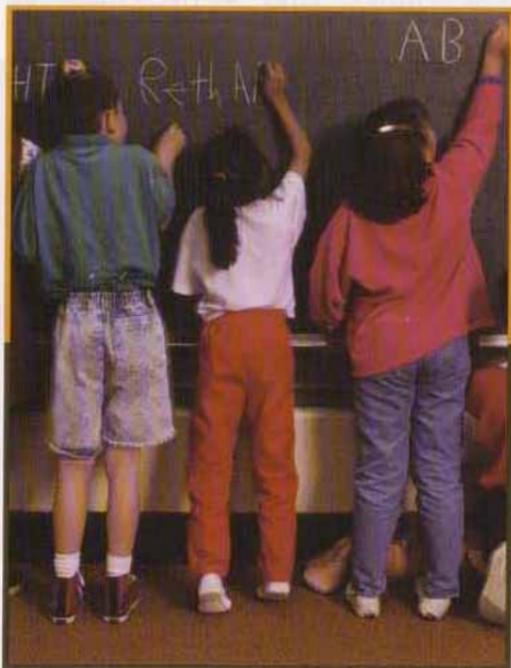


When Self-Esteem is Challenged by School Experiences

Like any experience in life, school is a better experience for some children than others. *Unfortunately, there are times when school experiences have a negative effect on a child's self-esteem.*

We can learn from failure, but constant failure is discouraging. Success, on the other hand, boosts our self-esteem and inspires us to try hard in order to experience that success again. Children who are discouraged at school need opportunities for success, both within the classroom and outside of school. When problems at school are caused by learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder or other conditions, it's important to work with appropriate professionals to ensure that your child gets the best possible assistance, support and treatment.

Consider the following three students. Each has unique self-esteem issues, which should be handled a little differently by their parents and teachers.



Too Perfect?

Mika had always been a top student. She paid attention in class, did all of her assignments and got high marks. The problem was that she was a perfectionist. Nothing but the best mark in the class satisfied her, and when she was working on a project she often agonized over whether her pictures were good enough or her writing neat enough. Mika sometimes frustrated herself to tears trying to write the extra five paragraphs she imagined might get her a few more marks.

Mika is a good student. But her self-esteem is suffering because she's too hard on herself. Her parents will have to walk a fine line. Mika doesn't need anybody else adding to her self-inflicted pressure for high achievement; however, if her parents try to overcompensate by acting like achievement is unimportant, she will feel they don't appreciate her effort. What Mika needs is perspective. She needs to be taught that a good mark is a worthwhile achievement, even if it's not the best mark. Her parents also need to show her that they value her for reasons other than school achievement.

Trailing Behind

"I'm just dumb." Becky often said things like that. Her father knew that it was unlikely that his daughter would ever be a star student. However, he felt that it was still important for her to work hard and learn as much as she could. But she had become very discouraged, and it was getting more and more difficult to get her to try her best. "How do I encourage her when she knows that even if she works very hard, most of the other kids will do better than her?" he wondered.

Becky may need some extra help or tutoring, but she also needs hope. She needs help in finding and achieving a level of success that is appropriate for her. She should be taught to compare herself to her own past achievements rather than to students she cannot compete with, and her parents and teacher should notice and point out her good effort and small improvements. Becky's parents could also help her identify areas of strength and interest outside of school – athletics, hobbies, art or music – encourage her to pursue those interests, and show her that they value her efforts and achievements in those areas.

Finding Focus

Everyone agreed that Michael was bright, but his school performance was always disappointing. He couldn't seem to get things done at school and often came home with unfinished work along with his usual homework.

Every night it was a struggle to keep him focused. Mom or Dad would have to sit with him at the kitchen table for two hours, trying stay calm while their son did just about everything but his work.

Having trouble concentrating does not, in itself, cause low self-esteem; the problem is what people say to Michael as a result: "Settle down, what's the matter with you?" and "You're such a fidgetter!" Michael needs someone to notice and praise him when he is being focused, even if it's only for a minute at a time. He also may need his work broken down into smaller chunks: "Let's do five questions now and then we'll do five more after supper." If the problem persists, it may help to negotiate a smaller workload with his teacher. It might be better for him to do ten questions well rather than be defeated by 30 questions he feels he can never complete. His parents also need to be patient. Concentration problems are common in young boys.

Often they improve as the child matures.

Collaborating with the School

Good communication between home and school allows you to work as a team for your child's benefit. This is especially important when things aren't going well.

Sherry had been putting off calling Dylan's teacher. Dylan often came home from school in a bad mood and it was hard to get him to do homework. He had complained that Mrs. Singh was picking on him. "But how do I call a teacher and tell her I think she's the problem?" Sherry thought.

In fact, Sherry doesn't have to start out by suggesting (or even assuming) that the teacher is the problem. For one thing, it would put the teacher on the defensive, which is seldom a good way to begin a communication. What Sherry really needs is an exchange of information. The teacher and Sherry both have information that the other doesn't have. She might try an approach like this:

"Hi, Mrs. Singh, I'd like to meet with you sometime soon. Dylan doesn't seem very happy about school right now and I'd like to talk to you about what you're seeing at school, and tell you about what I'm seeing at home."

Sherry has let Mrs. Singh know that she is very concerned, without accusing or blaming anyone. Asking for a meeting also gives the teacher a day or two to observe Dylan more closely and collect her thoughts about how he's doing at school. This puts both parent and teacher on the road to problem-solving instead of confrontation.

5 Ways to Help Your Kids with Homework (without doing it yourself)

1. *A good place and time to work*

For kids who are reluctant to do homework or have trouble concentrating, it can help to set aside a specific time of day for homework. For example, the first hour after dinner can be "quiet work time": no TV, no video games. Everyone does homework or (if there's no homework) reads quietly. This sets up a regular expectation and a less distracting environment.

2. *Assemble the materials*

Some children have trouble because they are not sure how to get started. Parents can help by reading over assignments with their children, and making sure they have the materials they need to do the job (eg. taking them to the library to get the books they need).

3. *Stay close by*

Some children need an adult presence to keep them on track. One way to do this is to sit at the kitchen table with them and pay some bills or read the newspaper. That way you are available for encouragement and help without standing over them while they work.

4. *Help them manage the workload*

Young students these days can have a lot of homework and special projects. Even good students can get overwhelmed when things pile up. Help your child to break big projects into smaller steps and to figure out how much needs to be done each night in order to finish on time.

5. *When they don't know the answer*

When they're stuck, children will ask for the answer. However, the whole point of school assignments is learning. If we just hand them the answer, they don't learn as much. The best way to help is to lead your child towards the answer. Show her the next step. Ask a question that will reveal part of the answer. Show her where to find the answer in a book.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The development of healthy self-esteem is a process that continues all our lives. Sometimes it will seem like things are going right for your child, and other times it won't. If you are worried and don't know what to do, you can always ask for help from a psychologist, counsellor, teacher or someone else you trust. But remember, when you're not sure what to do next, it seldom hurts to go back to the basics. With self-esteem, that's the parent/child relationship. Concentrate on building and nurturing that positive relationship between you and your child. That's where self-esteem begins and it's also the anchor in tough times.



LOVE IN ACTION

"After Lucy was born, I didn't feel confident about looking after her. Part of me wished I could just leave her to Cynthia.

"But I want my baby to know me, to know that I love her. And when you think about it, holding a baby that you love her doesn't mean much. You have to show her. So I did, by giving her all those things a baby needs: carrying, rocking, walking, changing, playing, burping - and once she was on solids, feeding too.

"Now I could change a diaper in the dark. But more important, I'm really close to Lucy. I know when she's hungry, how she likes to be cuddled, when she's too tired to play. I'm part of her growing up. And that's a great feeling."

*Be a hands-on dad.
For your baby.
For your family.
For you.*

This message is brought to you by Parenting for Life - an award-winning, magazine publisher program that provides parents, grandparents and the well-being of babies.

Parenting for Life

TODAY'S PARENT

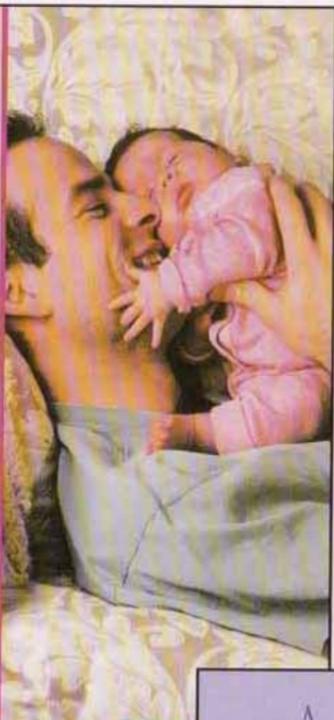
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A WORLD TO Discover

"Mucking in a puddle, getting wet and dirty. When I saw her, my first thought was to scold."

"For some reason, though, I took a second look. There were a couple of water bugs on the surface of the water, and I could hear Sara wattering. 'Hi, Mr. Bug, climb on my stick.' She was so totally absorbed, she didn't even notice me."

"Diapers, science, imagination - it was all right here. What else could possibly have the richness of this puddle for her? I watched her for a long time, and then I stepped down beside her. And our hearts learned something that day."

Through exploration and play, children grow: in countless ways. Step into your child's world... and discover the power of play.

This message is brought to you by Parenting for Life - an award-winning, magazine publisher program that provides parents, grandparents and the well-being of babies.

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TODAY'S PARENT

THE #1 CHILDREN'S MAGAZINE



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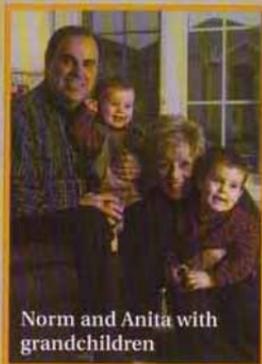
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Notes

A MESSAGE FROM

Norman W. Naumoff
President of Kodak Canada Inc.



Norm and Anita with grandchildren

DEAR PARENTS:

Kodak Canada is proud to introduce this fifth booklet of the **Parenting for Life** series, the award winning non-profit public education program that promotes positive parenting and the well-being of families.

Focus on Self-Esteem: Nurturing your school-age child provides parents with an understanding of how self-esteem develops throughout childhood and builds insight on how the role that parents play can impact the development of their child's self-esteem.

As we began raising our three children, my wife Anita and I soon realized that all our children were unique in the way that they looked at the world and the way that they saw themselves as a part of that world. Through the years, we experienced first hand the influence that parents, siblings, peers and society in general can have on a child's sense of self-worth and belonging. We learned that developing positive self-esteem for a child is a lengthy process that requires parents to be committed, patient and understanding. The effort has been well rewarded as we watched our children evolve a sense of self-worth that has been their foundation in meeting the challenges of life.

At Kodak Canada, we care about the well-being of families and children. We hope that this new booklet will provide you with a resource that will assist you in nurturing your child's self-esteem.

Yours sincerely,



Norman W. Naumoff
President,
Kodak Canada Inc.

PARENTING FOR LIFE



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Supporting Parents / Strengthening Families

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Email: info@psychologyfoundation.org

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consultation with a physician or other qualified experts.*

F Focus on Self-Esteem

Nurturing your school-age child

The success of tomorrow's world depends largely on how we live in it today. Building strong, healthy families is key to our future and the right information at the right time can provide needed support for growing families. Education and skills that enable parents and children to learn, play and grow together strengthens families. That is what Parenting for Life is all about.

In 1995, The Psychology Foundation of Canada and Today's Parent Group joined efforts to develop Parenting for Life - a non-profit public education program promoting positive parenting skills and the well-being of families. The resources, including booklets and posters from Parenting for Life, are used as a part of many parent education programs across Canada. In 1998, Parenting for Life received the FRP Canada Media Award from the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs for its contributions to positive parenting.

Dr. Ester Cole,
C. Psych.
Chair
Parenting for Life



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