

FOSTERING YOUR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM... THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL

A healthy sense of self may ultimately be a child's best armor when faced with challenging situations... in the classroom, in relationships with peers and even later in the workforce. It is through self-confidence that a child can assert himself and make sensible choices. In fact, research has shown that children with a healthy sense of self-esteem are less vulnerable to becoming victims of abduction, aggression or exploitation. The formation of self-esteem begins at birth and is still very much in the developmental stage during a child's preschool years and continues well into adolescence and beyond. How a child eventually comes to feel about himself is the result of an accumulation of contacts and experiences with other people and with the environment.



As a parent, you can help build your child's self-esteem; Following are some helpful guidelines that will help you foster your child's self-esteem from infancy into the teen years:

- Pay attention to your child's needs and respond to them as promptly as possible - they need to know that they can always depend on you;
- Demonstrate your love for your child through your actions as well as your words. Be spontaneous and affectionate: a look, a hug, a smile, positive reinforcement or a special message in your child's lunchbox saying, I think you are terrific! Your love will boost your child's self-esteem and show him that he is precious to you;
- Recognize your child's unique qualities and encourage him to develop them. Remember to praise your child not only when he learns a new skill, accomplishes a new task, or for a job well done, but also for all the effort that he has put into it;
- Create a "Wall of Fame" for your child - a special area where you can post any of his drawings, certificates showing effort and success, or a spelling test that he worked so hard on;
- As your child grows, slowly start including him in decision-making and consider his opinions.
"What would you like to do for your birthday this year?" "What colour should we paint the basement?"
"What would you like to eat tonight?" "Which movie should we watch this afternoon?"
- Set realistic goals for your child so that he can experience success;
- Create a safe, loving home environment. Children who don't feel safe or are abused at home are at greatest risk for developing poor self-esteem. A child who is exposed to parents who repeatedly fight and argue, may feel they have no control over their environment and become helpless or depressed;
- Develop a trusting and open relationship with your child. Talk to him and listen attentively to his needs. Remind him to never hesitate to confide anything that makes him feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. It is very common for children to spontaneously open up to their parents while they are doing an activity together, ie: driving to school or hockey practice, colouring, playing dress-up, sledding or baking;



FOSTERING YOUR CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM... THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL

- Find and make time in your day to spend exclusively with your child – that means no cell phones or other interruptions! By establishing an open and honest communication with your children early on in life, you will create a lasting bond with your child. This may prove to be invaluable as they mature and encounter challenging situations.

As your child enters into adolescence, it is important to continue bolstering his self-esteem:

- Try spending quality time every day with your teen by engaging in activities that suit his age and interests. Shared experiences (meal times, going shopping, driving to school, helping them look for their first job etc.) help to build feelings of trust and respect that forms the basis for open communication. Your teen will learn that you are available to listen either when he is having a problem or when things are going well! Remember to use this time for conversation and not confrontation!
- Model the type of behaviour you expect from your teen. If you want honest expressions of feelings, you must be prepared to do the same;
- Respect his opinions and choices. It is okay to disagree without becoming derisive or mocking your child's decisions. Adolescence can be a trying period for some teens as they are building their identity and slowly coming into their own;
- Use active listening with your teenager. Pay careful attention to the emotion behind the message and try to determine what your teen is saying by rephrasing it in your own words;
- Encourage your teen to succeed and help him work through his differences and struggles;
- Help your teen find his unique qualities and encourage them. Your teen may not be a straight "A" student or the best athlete, however, he may be very artistic, empathetic or the one that makes everyone laugh;
- Create opportunities for your teen to learn how to make positive decisions about his life. Give him responsibilities, encourage him to volunteer or work in your community;
- Offer praise for tasks well done and if your teen falls short, suggest positive ways in which to improve – make sure you don't criticize his behaviour;
- Set realistic boundaries and be consistent in applying them.

Keep in mind that there is no such thing as a perfect parent! It is normal to feel overwhelmed at times. Step back, take a deep breath, and wait until you feel ready to deal with the situation. A sense of humor can also be very helpful during these times and choosing one's battles can go along way in maintaining a healthy and harmonious relationship with your child!

Remember, you don't have to go through this alone ... if you require additional information or assistance, please don't hesitate to contact us or visit our website at www.missingchildrensnetwork.ngo