

Empowering the Children...helping them Soar with Self-esteem

*Sheelu Aggarwal**

Whether it is adjusting to a different teaching style, juggling academic demands, or coping with peer pressure, most children find themselves facing difficult situations at school sometime during their academic career. While parents can't (and shouldn't) shield their children from these challenges directly, they can counsel them; the way a parent responds can make all the difference.

Studies have found that children whose parents promote the child's self-esteem tend to do better in school, are less likely to succumb to negative peer pressure, and have the confidence to face life's many challenges. Dr. Robert Brooks, a clinical professor of psychology at Harvard University Medical School and author of *The Self-esteem Teacher* says, "One of the most important things a parent can do is to be empathetic and to see the world

through their child's eyes. This is a basic skill parents need to promote because it will determine what you say to your child when they are having a problem." The best thing parents can do if a child is experiencing difficulty is to recognise their child's concerns and talk about them with the child. You need not promise that everything will be just fine. But do remind them of instances when they were nervous and things turned out okay.

It is advisable for parents to work together with a child's teacher to recognise what is unique about the child and build on his/her strengths to help him/her develop self-confidence.

Bringing Brian out of the Bushes

In his book, Dr. Brooks has shared one of his experiments where he adopted the same course of action to coax Brian Murphy out of the bushes and back to his school books. "I met with him and found out that he thought what he did

* Lecturer, Department of Teacher Education, Maharaja Surajmal College (Indraprastha University, Delhi)

best was to take care of his dog.” Brooks conveyed this to Brian’s principal, who was prompted to develop a special



“Pet Monitor” position for Brian, where he helped take care of the new school rabbit and all the other school pets. Soon Brian was coming to school ten minutes early to take care of the animals.

“His teacher then suggested that since the school library didn’t have any books on pet care, the child should write his own book. Initially, he didn’t think that he could do it, but together they wrote a book, had it bound, and put in the library. By the end of the year, he had the confidence to give a school lecture on how to care for pets.”

A perfect example of how giving a child responsibility can help him to overcome any obstacle. When parents and teachers get together, there can be amazing turning points in a child’s life.

Parents should serve as effective guides, they need to build a child’s self-esteem by developing discipline, a

sense of accountability, and caring for others. “Self-esteem is based on accomplishments,” explains Dr. Brooks. “Building self-esteem is not about inflating a child’s ego with praise.”

The following are several steps parents can take to build their child’s self-esteem and teach them the tools they need to become successful, confident individuals.

Accept children for who they are, “Recognise that every child is different and appreciate that there are many paths to success,” advises Dr. Brooks. “Accepting them for who they are and not who we want them to be will change the way you interact with your child.” Celebrate their unique qualities and refrain from comparing your child with siblings, friends, or even yourself. Such unconditional love is the key to promoting self-esteem and open communication. You may not always agree with what your children are saying, but you need to give them an opportunity to say it and to accept them and their feelings.

Let the child know from day one that you love him/her no matter what happens, let him/her know that you’ll listen without judging him/her and that you’ll always respect him/her. And you’ll find that even after reaching an age when he/she wants to be independent, he/she will come to you to talk.

Teach Responsibility

Giving children responsibilities helps them realise that they are capable. The

most important thing a parent can do to help build children's confidence is to let them take on responsibilities. Parents need to make sure that children are held accountable for their work and know what is expected of them upfront.

Make it clear what they are expected to do and praise them for a job well done. But, don't be so particular if there is a lump in the bed or some crumbs in the corner... what's important is that the child has accomplished something.

Early on, parents can give children responsibilities around the home to let them know they're contributing to the family. Older children should be encouraged to get involved in charitable work. Dr. Brooks explains, "Involving children may take longer to get the job done, but it sends a message that you have faith in their abilities. It gives them an opportunity to shine and facilitates a feeling of contributing to the world."

It is also important to let children know they're responsible for their own actions. If, for example, they spend all their allowance on the first day, they will have to go without a special snack or toy that they may want later in the week. Set rules appropriately to the wrong doing and enforce them. For example, if he/she neglects to bring his/her clothes to the laundry room, he/she won't have clean clothes that week.

Teach Problem Solving Skills

Children with high self-esteem feel they have some control over what is

happening in their lives. They're confident that they have the ability to solve problems and make decisions. Parents should share their experiences as children and students with them. Parents can help build their children's skills by giving them choices and involving them in discussions about how to solve specific problems.

Let children come up with solutions for every day problems. It will give them an opportunity to be responsible; often they feel more committed and motivated if we ask them for solutions to adult problems.

Applaud Effort, not Ability

While there is nothing wrong with an occasional heartfelt exclamation of "What a smart boy you are!" to show your support and attention, psychologists have found that lauding a child's ability can have the opposite effect of what you intend. The most important thing adults can do to build a child's self-esteem is to praise their effort. Children must be taught the value of working hard and strategising when dealing with academic challenges.

A recent Columbia University study of 412 fifth graders found that praising children for their intelligence or ability can backfire. It can make them highly performance oriented and vulnerable to setbacks. Children commended for their ability came to believe that intelligence is a fixed trait, so when they failed they felt they lacked the competence to



succeed. These children are much more worried about failure and avoided taking risks. Meanwhile, children commended for their effort concentrate on learning strategies for achievement and mastering new challenges. When children who were praised for their hardwork performed poorly, they showed a sense of control and determination. To them, failing meant they hadn't tried hard enough and they were determined to learn how to do better next time.

So, the next time your daughter or son brings home an "A" on a project, try saying, "Wow, you really put a lot of work into that. I'm impressed!" instead of, "Wow, you're such a good student!". She will begin to see her accomplishment as mastering a skill rather than displaying an innate talent.

Help Children Learn from Mistakes

Parents need to teach children that mistakes are an important part of learning and growing. It may start to sound hollow to keep saying, "Well, you did your best," but it makes a difference. That's how one learns to deal with life. It's the child who can pick himself up after a monster failure who is successful later on.

Parents can help their children learn from setbacks by showing them how to solve a problem and by avoiding negative or demanding comments. If your child gets a bad grade in a test, don't tell him he didn't try hard though. Instead ask him why he did poorly. Allow him to

recognise the factors he can change next time (e.g. I failed the exam because I didn't take good notes), and help him figure out what will help in the future.

Even if your child isn't chosen for a varsity sport or does not get the lead in a play, he should be praised for improving or trying in the first place. "It's so important to be encouraging and to acknowledge when something is not easy for your child," says Dr. Brooks. "You want your child to treat mistakes as experiences to learn from rather than feel defeated by them."

Be There for Them

Parents' involvement can make a great deal of difference in the child's life. One



of the things children want most is our time, and in today's busy world, that is the hardest for parents to give. When parents are involved in their child's life, it lets the child know he/she matters.

Self-esteem comes from a supportive primary relationship. If

parents can spend just 10 to 15 minutes doing something together with their child, the child begins to look forward to that.

You can see the biggest difference in the self-esteem of children who come from homes where they are not the top priority. Put it on your calendar to spend time with your child or children. There is no question that is the essence to helping a child develop into a successful adult.

According to the National PTA of USA, alcohol use, violence and antisocial behaviour decrease as parental involvement increases. In addition, when parents are involved in their children's education, they have higher test scores, better attendance, and complete homework more consistently.

Children want to know that you are interested in what they are doing. If

weekdays are too hectic, offer to coach your son's football/cricket team or try to make it to all your daughter games on weekends. Says Dr. Brooks, "I am a firm believer that to promote a child's self-esteem, you need to build in special time with your child. Do something alone with each of your children to really get to know them. And let them know they'll have your undivided attention. Don't answer the phone during their special time." Your child will know that no matter how busy things get, there's a set time to talk and discuss issues with you.

"We must never underestimate the power of even one adult to guide a child's life in a positive direction," Dr. Brooks observes. "Believing in a child and providing them with opportunities that reinforce their feeling of self-worth is a truly wonderful gift we can offer. It's our legacy to the next generation."