

THE VALUE OF SELF-ESTEEM

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For over twenty years, there has been an argument over whether the self-esteem of a person determines the quality of a person's life --and--whether self-esteem can be enhanced through education. Let's explore these questions.

Self-esteem is a feeling that a person has about him or herself. Logically, if you feel good about yourself, you do what you are doing better. Whether it is walking into a party or doing a skill, feeling good about yourself seems to influence how well you do whatever it is you are doing.

When Peggy Bielen and I spent eight years of our lives writing a program called Project Self-Esteem, we needed to find a definition for self-esteem.

We used an analogy from our training with Dorothy Corkille Briggs, author of *Your Child's Self-Esteem*. Each person needs two legs to stand upon; one leg is feeling lovable (which can be translated into VALUED in the work place), and the other leg is feeling capable. A person who feels both lovable and capable stands tall in each moment of his or her life.

To feel LOVABLE, one needs to have at least one person who loves them NO MATTER WHAT THAT PERSON DOES OR DOESN'T DO. Unconditional love. Loved no matter what happens. Most of us were raised by parents who took their love away as a means of controlling us. "Mommy loves you when you are a good girl," or "Daddy loves you when you are a good boy." Failing to meet the expectations of our parents, the endless message was, "not good enough," which a child translates into, "not lovable."

Perhaps the greatest gift a parent can give a child is to be loved every single second of that child's life, regardless of behavior; "Yes, I am angry that you lost your skateboard! Yes, there will be a consequence for your choice! And....this is not about loving you. I love you every single second of every single day."

Feeling CAPABLE seems like an easy leg to strengthen and build. However, we have hundreds of thousands of children who feel incompetent in their daily lives. Some of these feelings can be attributed to a school system that, being overwhelmed by the diversity in students, has failed to meet the individual child's needs. The individual child needs to feel competent--capable. Children who are endlessly criticized by parents do not feel lovable or capable. It is important for a parent to build on the strengths of a child instead of constantly layering that child with expectations. Judgment and criticism continuously erode a child's self-esteem.

When I taught fourth grade, I had a small group of gifted students in one classroom. These bright children had no patience for the slower students; sometimes, they had no patience with me! I took them into a room and sat them at desks with a piece of paper, face down. "You are going to take a timed test. There is no, absolutely no, talking. If you talk you will be disqualified. You have ten minutes to read the essay and answer the questions." The students turned over their papers. Each one of them attempted to make a comment. The other teachers and I shut them down. At the end of ten minutes, all of the students were in

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an uproar. Each one thought they were the only ones who had a paper that was blurred enough that it was difficult or impossible to read. In truth, each one of them had a blurred paper. We talked about their frustration, their sense of hopelessness as time ran out, their anger with me and the system. I told them, "Some students deal with what you have just dealt with every day. Whether they are bi-lingual or have difficulty learning, they sit in the pile of frustration and anger--until they give up because being successful is hopeless. You have a gift for learning. Be grateful for that gift. You do not live in constant fear or frustration during each school day. What I want you to consider is how you can help other students instead of criticizing them. The first step is not to judge. The second step is up to you."

What happened next was awesome! My classroom turned into a family where everyone pulled for each other; the gifted helped the less gifted. Judgments stopped. Learning happened!

To assist your child in feeling lovable, love him or her--no matter what behavior exists. To assist your child in feeling capable, compliment him/her for everything that the child does that is positive. Teach your child HOW to do the things that need to be learned. Teach HOW to do something instead of criticizing the child for not meeting invisible standards.

I believe that self-esteem is the center of the spoke on a wheel. How a child feels about him/herself determines the quality of life for that child. What friends a child chooses, what a child does with success and failure, what choices a child makes is determined by the strength of the two legs on which that child stands: one is lovable and one is capable.

Raise your child with strong self-esteem and you will be amazed at how well that child deals with the ups and downs of his/her life. My children are grown. I consider one of my greatest gifts to them their strong sense of self. I have practiced this that I teach. Self-esteem truly makes a difference in the quality of life for a child.

**On a spiritual note: I do not perpetuate the idea of self over God. What I see is that I am unable to take in the love of God unless I love myself. I am unable to clearly love others unless I love myself. Loving myself is the core of living in love--and then I can love God with all my heart and soul--which I do!