
Self-esteem in young children under five

This fact sheet uses 'she' or 'her' to refer to your baby. Change to suit your child's sex.

What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is liking yourself. It is not conceit or boastfulness, but believing in yourself and what you do.

Self-esteem is how you feel about yourself as a person and knowing that there are things that you can do well – in other words it is about being and about doing.

Part of self-esteem is feeling that you have a place in the world where you belong – that you are part of a family where you matter. It is knowing about your roots and having confidence in your future. This can be a problem for children who have come from other countries and lost touch with their 'roots'. It can also be a problem for children who have been part of a family break up if they are split off from part of their family and the history of that part of the family.

Why is self-esteem important?

- There is in every culture a basic level of self-esteem that is needed.
- Self-esteem helps people to feel that they can develop their own skills and contribute to their community.
- Research suggests that people need good self-esteem to feel confident about doing things for themselves and to use their abilities and talents in the best way they can.
- Low self-esteem can be linked to worse health such as stress, heart disease and an increase in anti-social behaviors.

It is important to help develop children's self-esteem from the time they are born. Children of all cultures need to have a place in the family and need to know they are loved because of the special people they are.

Cultural differences

Some people in some cultures believe that feeling good about your group or community is important but feeling good about yourself is not. These parents may not praise or encourage their children for fear it will create a self-satisfaction that will prevent the child from trying harder.

In some cultures people believe that praise will make children 'boastful'. However, having personal confidence and self-esteem does not mean giving up these cultural values, but it can add to them. Children who feel good usually try harder than those who don't.

How self-esteem is developed

Young children see themselves through their parents' eyes. If their parents see them as special and lovable and show them and tell them this often, they will develop self-esteem. If they keep getting messages that they are not lovable or a nuisance they are likely to feel bad about themselves.

What parents can do

Here are some things you can do to help build your child's self-esteem.

- Hold your baby or toddler close, tell her you love her. Show her you enjoy her company.
- Spend time with her, listen to her beginning to talk, comfort her when she cries, and play gently with her.
- Help your child feel that she is needed in your family. Let her help you in small ways eg carry something for you.
- Help her to succeed. Watch when she plays and help when she needs it.
- Involve children in the wider family, help them to know their relatives and tell stories about your family and its history.
- Keep little family rituals eg story at bedtime, kiss goodbye and the other ways of doing things that are special to your family.
- Let her learn new things. Show your child that you have faith in her.

Parent Self-esteem

- Children watch and learn from what their parents do. Show your child the sort of person you want her to be.
- You can't give food from an empty cooking pot and you can't give confidence if you feel bad about yourself. It is important to look after your own needs for your children's sake.

Special tips for parents

- It is part of good parenting to let your children see that you feel good about yourself.
- Take time out for yourself regularly. Do some things you really enjoy or feel proud of.
- Spend some time with friends who support you and help you to feel good.
- If you have a partner make sure that you keep regular time to be together.

Note: If children are punished or shouted at a lot they are likely to become timid or aggressive. If you get angry with your children, walk away until you calm down. If it happens a lot, ask for help for your children's sake as well as your own.

For more help and information contact:

- Your Early Childhood Health Centre
- Tresillian Telephone HelpLine (24 hours)
- Karitane Care Line (24 hours)

This fact sheet is based on information provided by Child and Youth Health (SA) (www.cyh.com) and endorsed by NSW Health

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.