

Building children's self-esteem

'Self-esteem' is a term used to describe how a person experiences his or her own feelings of self-worth. In other words, how they feel about themselves.

People who have high self-esteem will value themselves and feel that they are a 'capable' person. They will have a generally positive outlook and feel that they are free to make choices about their life. They will generally build good relationships with those around them and are more likely to bring up children who have high self-esteem.

People who have low self-esteem will not value themselves very highly and will often find life difficult to negotiate. They may struggle with relationships, and need others to reassure them that they are a 'worthwhile' person. People with low self-esteem often find it difficult to make choices in their life and find new situations stressful. They are also much more likely to develop self-destructive behaviours such as eating disorders, self-harm, alcohol or drug abuse and violence.

It is widely accepted that the most important factor in children's development of self-esteem is their home environment. In most circumstances, parents are the most important influence in on how a child feels about himself or herself and helping children develop high self-esteem is one of the most important tasks of parenthood.

Issues associated with family separation

Family separation can influence and interrupt a child's development of self-esteem. Children who were developing high self-esteem may begin to doubt their self-worth and children who may already have lower self-esteem may find the changes in their life even more difficult to cope with.

As a parent who may be struggling with the impact of separation, it can be difficult to focus on your children's experiences. But it's important that you are able to deal with your own feelings away from your children so that you can support them through the changes in their life and make sure that they have the high levels of self-esteem that will help them to have happy and successful lives.

- **Let them talk about their feelings**

It's vital that you give your children the opportunity to talk about how they feel. Don't hide from their distress and be prepared for them to hide their true feelings. Acknowledge how they're feeling and invite them to tell you more. Help your child to open up with open questions like 'tell me about how that makes you feel' and make sure they don't feel as if they're under interrogation. Help younger children express their feelings through drawing or play.

- **Take responsibility for decisions**

Don't leave your child to make important decisions such as where they are going to live or when they are going to see you and their other parent. It's your job as an adult and as a parent to take responsibility.

- **Be prepared for the unexpected**

When children are spending time with their other parent, they will inevitably bring some experiences from their into your life. This can be quite difficult or even painful. Make sure you are prepared for this and allow them the opportunity to talk about those things freely if they want to. If they tell you they went paint-balling, don't say 'paint-balling is stupid'. If they say they went out for a pizza, just ask them if they had a nice time and let them talk about it.

Tips for building high self-esteem in children

Very often, the way we bring up our children is a reflection of the way that we were brought up by our parents. We may very often hear ourselves saying to our children exactly the same things that were said to us as we were growing up. Often, that's fine but we need to be careful that we aren't passing on negative attitudes that lead to low self esteem.

Listen to the things you say to your children. Are you critical or negative? Do you ignore them when you're stressed? Do you tell them they're stupid? Do you shout at them or laugh when they make mistakes? These are things that will lead to low self-esteem in your children. Here are some ways that you can help your children develop high self-esteem. It will be a life long gift to them!

- **Praise your child**

Children love praise. Just watch your child's face when you do! Don't over praise, simply say things like 'oh, that's really good' or 'you've done really well with that'. It's also a good idea to praise how hard they've worked to achieve something as this reinforces the achievement. Simply telling a child that they are clever can make them fear failure. Try 'you must have worked really hard to do that' rather than 'you're a obviously really clever'.

- **Take time to listen**

It can be difficult after a long day or when you're feeling stressed, but ask your child about what they've been doing and let them talk freely. When they tell you something, show them how interested you are and ask them to tell you some more. Take an interest in their interests even if they seem boring to you.

- **Be amazed!**

Let your child tell you about things they have discovered and join in their enthusiasm. Even if it's the most obvious thing in the world, just say 'wow, that's amazing!'

- **Chastise the behaviour not the child**

It's really important that children learn that a particular behaviour is wrong, not that they are a bad person for doing something wrong. Avoid saying things like 'you really are a naughty boy' or 'you silly little girl'. Instead, try 'that's naughty, I don't want you to do it again' or 'hitting other children is wrong, we'll go home if you do it again'.

- **Set good boundaries and be specific**

All children respond to good boundaries. Knowing how far they are allowed to go provides them with a sense of security. But try to be specific so that your child knows exactly where the boundary is set. Rather than 'I can't stand all this noise', try 'please stop hitting the drum'.

- **Don't try to make them into something they're not**

All children have their own strengths and weaknesses. Don't try to force your child to be something they're not. Help them to develop the things they are good at and enjoy.

- **Let them know it's okay to make mistakes**

Although it can be difficult at times, allow your child to make mistakes. If they spill something on the floor just help them to clear it up. If they choose the wrong boyfriend or girlfriend, support them when it goes wrong without saying 'I told you so'.

- **Acknowledge their feelings**

Children need to know that it's okay to feel the things that they feel. If they say they are sad, don't try to persuade them that they don't, just let them talk and show them that you understand.