



Building Blocks

When you ask most parents what they want for their children when they grow up, most will say that they want them to be successful, well-rounded, and to feel "good" about themselves. In today's society, we are always trying to help our children have great self-esteem. We give every child on a sports team a trophy. We change traditional grading systems so that children never fail. We constantly tell them how smart, beautiful, and amazing they are. Why is it, then, that we don't have a bunch of self-assured, confident kids running around?

It is because these strategies don't always work. They are not the building blocks of a healthy self-esteem. They do, however, cause children to look outside of themselves for praise. As a result, children begin to base their self-worth on the opinions of others, not on their own feelings of achievement. They may think, "How come my teacher didn't say I was the smartest? How come my boyfriend isn't always saying I am beautiful? I must not be smart or beautiful if others aren't telling me so." In addition, constant praise is NOT real-life. As adults, our peers don't follow us around saying, "Good job. Great work. I am so impressed."

So, how do we build self-esteem without overt praise? Children begin to feel good about themselves when they struggle through and accomplish hard tasks. Often parents encumber this process because they don't like to see their little darlings struggle. For instance, when my three-year old son works on a hard puzzle, he often gets frustrated and wants to quit. I could jump in and show him where the pieces go. I could say, "You can do it dear. You are so smart. Don't get upset." Instead I sit back and watch him struggle. I gently encourage by saying, "Look, you found that piece. Wow, you are half way done." Notice I don't judge his work or undermine his frustrations by saying, "Don't get upset, it will be OK." Inevitably, when he finally works through the puzzle and finishes, he is SO EXCITED. He has learned that he can accomplish something tough, without mom's help! He also feels a sense of pride and knows that he is capable.

Let's look at another example for clarification. Let's say that your child draws a picture. Most of us, when the child brings us the picture, would want to say, "This is beautiful dear, great job!" Two things occur when you praise in this way. First, the child might not think that the picture is beautiful. He may feel that you, as the adult, are being

dishonest with him. Secondly, the child may focus more on the need to be accepted than on valuing and assessing his own work. Instead say something like, "I noticed that the sun is particularly colorful in this picture and that you spent a lot of time creating the details on the various flowers. I can really see the amount of effort that you put into this picture." This statement conveys the message that you notice the details of the picture as well as appreciate the hard work that your child put forth.

There are various other ways that parents can foster self-esteem in their children. One way is with household chores. Of course, I have never heard a child say, "Thanks mom and dad for giving me all of these chores. I really feel a sense of accomplishment and self-worth." However, chores afford children the opportunity to work through difficult tasks and see the "fruits of their labor." Parents also need to "back-off" and allow children to struggle through school work, misunderstandings with siblings and friends, issues at school, etc. Every time we "jump-in" and rescue our kids from their problems, we are sending the understated message that, "You can't handle this on your own, so I have to."

So, one of my current methods of increasing my three-year old's self-esteem is allowing him to dress himself. It is excruciating to watch this process, and I have to repress my urge to jump in and help out. BUT, after twenty minutes, he is done and is beaming with his sense of accomplishment. Granted, he may have his striped pants on backwards, his plaid shirt untucked, and his shoes on the wrong feet, but he is proud, proud, proud!

Decca is a wife, mother, counselor, and parenting educator. In an effort to further help kids and parents, Decca began studying the Love and Logic Parenting® philosophy. She teaches classes to other "Parents-in-training" and runs Blue Ridge Parenting LLC. www.blueridgeparenting.com

