

SELF-ESTEEM BEGINS IN INFANCY

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Self-esteem is a term that seems synonymous with teen years. However, how we feel about ourselves starts at the very beginning of our lives. What is self-esteem? It is the value we place upon ourselves. Feelings are always subjective so, unless we have developed a very positive self-esteem, outside influences will easily affect us to make us feel fragile and insecure. Self-esteem has much to do with trust, love and respect. The trust, love and respect we get from others build the trust, love and respect we develop in ourselves.

An infant cries for comfort or for food. When those needs are satisfied immediately, trust is developed. As the infant starts to learn to roll over, crawl and then walk, much encouragement and adulation tells the child he is doing the right thing, that he is pleasing his parents. As he observes others already doing what he is trying to do, then he knows it is possible and keeps trying until he can master the skill himself. The more he tries, the more positive reinforcement he gets and the more positive reinforcement he gets, the more he tries. At this point the value he places on himself is in direct response to how his parents express their feelings towards him.

An infant's self-worth can be negatively affected when his needs are either not met, or his parents' responses are inconsistent. There is a story told of an experiment done at orphanages during the war years. Half the infants were hugged, bathed and fed consistently. The others were handled as little as possible and only their basic needs were met. The first group flourished and the second group died for lack of the love and nurturing that was necessary to create a sense of security. Such an experiment would have been criminal in today's society, but it did demonstrate the absolute necessity for a child to feel loved, valued, cared for and, indirectly, given a hope for the future.

A toddler learns that there are things that make his parents happy and there are things that do not. To clearly demonstrate boundaries, allow the child to make mistakes and to praise him for making the right decision. This will help him preserve his self-esteem. To shout, verbally pounce on him without warning, or to neglect giving praise when he makes a good decision, is to jeopardize a child's self-worth. A child needs to hear and feel affirmation from a parent. He has a right to expect a safe, secure and nurturing environment.

A small child who feels valued and secure will be bold. He will persist in mastering skills, will very likely have a happy disposition, will learn quickly where the boundaries are, and will be more easily corrected by responding positively to praise. When a parent is always negative and constantly says 'no', the child begins to develop negative feelings about him self. A child who does not feel valued and secure will be more tentative in outlook (not try new skills) for fear of

being given another disapproving parental response. He will likely cry more, be reserved, or may become belligerent and demand attention. After all, negative attention is better than none at all, right?

Our kids' self-esteem is affected by how we feel about ourselves as parents. If we don't give ourselves personal value it is very difficult to develop personal value in our children. It is very important for our kids to have positive role models. We are it!

If you need help in improving your own self-esteem there are many resources available. You will have a vastly different outlook on life when you see it with a positive and hopeful view. Your whole household will be buzzing with possibilities and you and your kids will achieve great things. Go for it!

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.