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**ACT**  
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Community Services

**Healthy self-esteem is feeling good about yourself, feeling that you are a worthwhile person. While we all have self-doubts at times, it is important for children to feel okay about themselves most of the time.**

**Self-esteem enables them to try new things without too much fear of failing, to reach out and make friends, and to manage problems they are likely to meet along the way.**

**Self-esteem builds a solid foundation for coping with life.**

## What is self-esteem?

- Self-esteem is about valuing who you are. It is about liking yourself. It is not conceit or boastfulness, but about believing in yourself and what you can do in the world.
- 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.
- Children are not born with self-esteem. It is learned through how parents and other important people feel about them and treat them.
- 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.
- Self-esteem is about what matters to you. If you want to be good at sport but everyone tells you that you are good at art, it will not help your self-esteem very much. If you get encouragement and help in something you want to do, and you succeed, your self-esteem will grow.

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## Why is self-esteem important?

- There is in every culture a basic level of self-esteem that is needed in our family or culture.
- Self-esteem helps people to feel that they can develop their own skills and contribute to their community.
- It gives you the confidence to have a go at something new, and helps you build resilience to overcome setbacks.
- Research suggests that when people have low self-esteem they don't feel confident about doing things for themselves or using their abilities and talents in the best way they can.
- Low self-esteem is also likely to be linked to worse health outcomes such as stress, coronary heart disease and an increase in anti-social behaviours.

**It is important to help develop children's self-esteem from the time they are born to give them a good foundation and help prevent poorer health outcomes for them later in adult life. 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

It is important to recognise that some people in some cultures believe that feeling good about your group or community is important, while feeling good about yourself as an individual is not as valued.

In some cultures, it is common practice for parents not to praise their child for fear it will create a self-satisfaction that will prevent the child from trying harder.

In some cultures praise is also avoided to prevent a child from becoming 'boastful'. However, having personal confidence and self-esteem does not mean giving up these cultural values, but it can add to them. Children when they feel good usually try harder than those who don't.

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# How self-esteem is developed

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## Babies

Very young babies don't have a sense of themselves as being separate human beings so they don't really have self-esteem as such. They gradually learn that they are loved and lovable because people care for them gently, look after them when they cry, talk and read to them, and smile at them consistently. When this happens it says to the baby—'you matter in the world'.

## Toddlers

As babies grow to become toddlers they still don't have a complete understanding about themselves. For example, if a one-year-old is standing on the end of a rope that she is trying to pull, she may not move her feet off the rope. This is because she doesn't yet realise that both the feet and the hands belong to her. One-year-olds still don't understand that all of their body and mind belong to them. Every time they learn a new skill they add to their sense of being able to do things and learning who they are.

When they say 'No' they are really saying 'I am a separate person and this is very exciting and important for me. I can practise this by saying 'No' even if I do want the ice cream that you are giving me'.

Toddlers need to try things for themselves. They may need lots of practice in different contexts so they can learn how to succeed. This builds their self-esteem.

Toddlers learn about themselves by learning what they look like, what they can do and where they belong. They find it very difficult to share because they are just learning who they are and what is theirs.

Toddlers 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 they are a nuisance, they will not so easily develop self-esteem.

## Preschoolers

By approximately three years of age children have learned that their bodies and minds are their own. They can manage time away from their parents or main caregivers because they have an inner sense of feeling safe. Their self-esteem develops in fairly physical ways, by comparing themselves with others, for example, who is the tallest, who is the fastest.

## Primary school years

Children starting school have to cope in a strange new situation with lots of other new children and new rules to learn.

Self-esteem in the primary school years is about how well children manage the learning tasks of the school, how they do at sport, how they look and how they can make friends with other children. Stresses at home like parents fighting with each other, problems at school such as having trouble with schoolwork, being bullied or not having friends, can affect children's self-esteem.

## Adolescence

Teenagers' self-esteem can be affected by the physical and hormone changes, and most importantly by how they look or how they think they look.

Young people who have a goal in life often have high self-esteem, as do those teenagers whose families support them.

Belonging to a group of friends is also very important to a young person's self-esteem. This is why they seem so attached to the telephone and want to do whatever their friends are doing.

## What parents can do

Almost all parents feel concerned about their child's self-esteem at times. Here are some things you can do to help build their self-esteem.

- Talk to your baby as you are going about your chores. See the world from her eyes and show delight in what interests her.
- Tell your child that you love her and let her see that you are glad she is who she is. Do this at odd moments not just when she has pleased you.
- Show your child that you love her by spending time with her, and doing some of the things she likes to do. With young children this may be playing their games, for example, having tea parties, dressing up.
- Go to young children who are playing nicely on their own before they seek you out. This shows you care about them.
- Show respect by talking in a way that you appreciate being spoken to. Listen in a way that shows you take seriously what your child has to say. This does not necessarily mean you agree with her point of view.
- Encourage friendships. Make her friends welcome in your home and get to know them.
- Support her schoolwork—take an interest without taking over. Support school working bees or tuck shop if you can.
- If she needs extra help with schoolwork try to provide this, but don't make her go over and over what she is not good at. Children need to also practise and enjoy what they are good at, to feel successful.
- Talk with the teacher. A good relationship between school and home is very important.
- Help your child to explore any hobbies that she is interested in.
- Help your child feel that she is needed in your family. Within reason for your child's age, ask and expect some help with the family chores such as feeding pets, setting the table, cleaning the car etc. This is not just about cleaning up her own mess but about doing her part for the family.
- Let your child assist you with something, for example, teenagers may be better than you at using the computer or programming the video.
- When you play games with your primary school age child, make sure that she has opportunities to win.
- Involve them in the wider family activities. Help them to know their relatives and about your family and its history, so they have a sense of belonging.
- Keep special mementos of their successes and important milestones in their lives.
- Take photos of your child so she has a sense of herself growing up and being loved by you. Children and teens love going through photos and re-living memories.

- Keep little family rituals. For example, a story at bedtime, the way you say goodbye and the other ways of doing things that are special to your family.
- Celebrate your child's achievements and successes.
- Show your child that you have faith in her. Don't solve all her problems. Help her learn problem-solving skills and learn to feel that she can manage many things for herself.
- Teach children personal safety. They need to be able to say 'No' to protect themselves in an unpleasant situation.
- Teach them to trust their feelings, and recognise that they don't have to keep secrets which frighten or hurt them.

If children have had a lot of changes, such as coming from another country, parents separating, or moving house a lot, try and keep them in touch with their roots as much as you can.

- Keep a diary with pictures of where they have been.
- Let them know about their family history.
- Try to keep them in touch with both sides of the family if possible.

Adopted children can have two sets of roots. Teenagers especially are often interested in finding out about their early childhood as part of working out who they are.

### Messages that help destroy children's self-esteem

- Constantly nagging.
- Ignoring children and not taking an interest in them.
- Messages that say you do not like your child, for example, 'I love you but I don't like you'.
- 'You are ...' messages that say something bad about them as people, for example 'you are ... lazy, untidy, naughty, a nuisance, a bully, shy, a sook ...'
- Comparing them with others, especially brothers and sisters that suggests they are not as good.
- Giving messages that life would be better without them, for example, 'If it weren't for the children we could have a good holiday' or 'I wish you hadn't been born'.
- Threatening to leave them or give them away if they do not do as you wish.
- Frowning or sighing when they want to talk to you or ask you for something that suggests it's too much effort for you to give them your time.

**When young people are the most difficult to live with, it is usually because they are not feeling good about themselves.**

### What parents can do for teenagers

Teenagers are undergoing major changes in their lives as they prepare for young adulthood and their self-esteem can often be shaky.

- Parents can help by showing that you believe in them and by encouraging them. Teenagers may deny it when you tell them that they look good, but they take in your message. Don't let their sometimes-not-interested reaction put you off. For example, 'You look really great with your hair that way, Jack'. 'You're just saying that because you're my mother. You're biased'. 'Well, I am your mother and I'm very proud you're my son'.
- Expect some help at home—even if it takes some explaining that it is part of belonging to the family. This says to your teenager that he is valued and needed as part of the family.
- Try and take an interest in your teenager's interests. For example, try to find something you like in their music. Ask them about the words of the songs and what they mean, but don't criticise.
- Listen to their opinions without always having a better or wiser answer. Help them to explore their own ideas. Let them know that they don't have to have the same opinions as you.
- Ask their help or advice sometimes. Show that you don't have all the answers.
- When something is really important to them, sometimes go out of your way to help them achieve it, even if you don't think it matters.
- Take an interest in their schoolwork, hobbies and sport and let them know that you are proud of their achievements.

- Keep them involved in the family. Expect them to attend special family celebrations and occasions, even if they don't stay around for long.
- When they make mistakes due to 'trying their wings', see them as mistakes to learn from. Let them know that is how most of us learn to do better.
- Welcome their friends into your home so you can get a chance to get to know them.
- Hang in there. When young people are the most difficult to live with, it is usually because they are not feeling good about themselves. This is the time they need to know that you are hanging in there with them.

### Special tips for parents

- It is important to look after your own self-esteem too. 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. For example, take a bubble bath, join a team or club, read a book, go for a walk or run, go to a movie, learn something new.
- Spend some time with friends who support you and help you to feel good.
- If you have a partner make sure that you spend time together.
- If your children are growing up, start thinking about new interests you might like to take up or old ones you enjoy that you haven't had time for.

## Reminders

- Children are not born with self-esteem.
- Young children learn self-esteem through what they can do and through what their parents think of them.
- 'Put down' messages really damage self-esteem.
- 'Doing' messages such as giving time, hugs and smiles are very important in building self-esteem.
- Laugh with your children—not at them.
- Keep giving sincere messages that build self-esteem to your teenagers, even if they say they don't believe you. These messages matter.
- Self-esteem is learned and can be changed.
- Take care of your own self-esteem.

## Contacts

<b>Child and Family Centres</b> (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
<b>Kids Help Line</b>	24-hour	1800 55 1800
<b>Parentline ACT</b>	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

## Websites

<a href="http://www.cyh.com">www.cyh.com</a>	Parenting and child health information
<a href="http://www.kidshelp.com.au">www.kidshelp.com.au</a>	Kids helpline
<a href="http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au">www.parentlink.act.gov.au</a>	Other parenting guides, including Living with teens, Optimism
<a href="http://www.raisingchildren.net.au">www.raisingchildren.net.au</a>	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens

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