

# Self-esteem



**Healthy self-esteem is feeling good about yourself and feeling you are a worthwhile person. It is about accepting and valuing who you are. While we all doubt ourselves at times, it is important for children to feel OK about themselves most of the time. Healthy self-esteem builds a foundation for good mental health now and into the future.**

## What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem relates to the inner feelings we have about ourselves and our worth.

- Children are not born with a sense of self-esteem. It is learned through how parents and other important people feel about them and treat them.
- Self-esteem also comes from feeling we have a place in the world, and are part of a family or community where we matter.
- It is about knowing where we come from and feeling positive about the future. This can be harder for children who have lost touch with their 'roots' through things like family break-up or moving to a new country or place.
- Self-esteem is different to self-confidence, but they are closely linked. Self-confidence comes from how we feel about our ability to do things. We can feel confident in some areas of life and not so confident in others.
- When children know they are good at something, their self-confidence grows and their inner self-esteem is likely to grow too. Healthy self-esteem helps children be more confident.

**Children's self-esteem develops over time. It comes from feeling loved, a sense of belonging, and feeling competent and able to do things.**

## Why is self-esteem important?

Healthy self-esteem is important for everyone. It:

- makes it easier to have a go at something new and feel we can develop skills and make a difference
- helps us be more resilient when there are setbacks
- supports better mental and physical health and wellbeing.

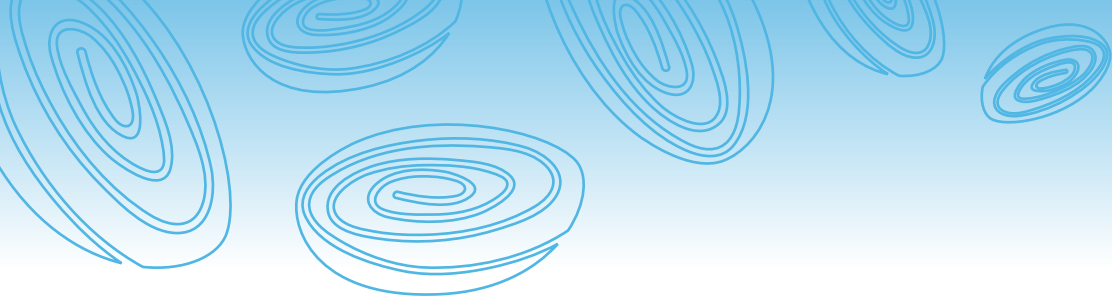
People with low self-esteem often don't feel they can do things for themselves or fully use their skills and abilities. Low self-esteem can also be linked with worse health outcomes such as stress and heart disease, and anti-social behaviours.

## Cultural differences

Some people in some cultures believe that feeling good about your group or community is what's important. Feeling good about yourself is not as valued. In some cultures it is common for parents not to praise their children for fear it will cause them to be boastful, or create self-satisfaction that will prevent them from trying harder.

However, having healthy self-esteem does not mean giving up cultural values. Children who feel good about themselves usually try harder and learn better than those who don't, and this can bring benefits to the group or community. Experiencing racism or discrimination may negatively impact children's self-esteem.

**Healthy self-esteem enables children to try new things without too much fear of failure, to reach out and make friends and deal with problems.**



## How self-esteem develops

### Babies

Babies gradually learn they are loved and lovable when people care for them gently, respond when they cry, and smile, talk and play with them. When this happens it says to baby, 'You matter in the world'.

### Toddlers

Toddlers are learning more about who they are but don't have a complete understanding of themselves as a separate person. When they learn a new skill they add to their sense of being able to do things and their sense of self.

- Sometimes when toddlers say 'No' to something they are really saying 'I am a separate person and this is very exciting and important for me.'
- Toddlers need to do things for themselves. They may need lots of practice to succeed. Being successful builds their confidence and 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 you see them as lovable and show and tell them this often, it builds their self-esteem. If they keep getting messages they are not lovable or are a nuisance, it will be harder to develop healthy self-esteem.**

### Children

By about 3 years of age children have a stronger sense of themselves. Their self-esteem develops in fairly physical ways by comparing themselves with others, eg who is the tallest or the fastest?

When children start school they have to cope in a new environment with lots of new children, and new rules to learn. Self-esteem in the primary school years is affected

by how well children manage learning tasks, how they do at sport, how they make friends with other children and how they think they look.

### Young people

Self-esteem can be affected by the rapid physical and emotional changes of adolescence. Young people are working out who they are and their place in the world. It is a time of big changes and their self-esteem can be shaky.

Friends and peer groups are becoming more important, and feeling accepted and that they belong enhances self-esteem. It is also important that young people feel they have the support of family and trusted friends and are inspired to achieve their goals. Self-esteem can be negatively affected if there are problems with things like friendships, relationships, sexuality or gender identity.

### Media

Children and young people are bombarded by images of the 'ideal' self and the 'perfect life' on TV, movies, the Internet and social media. Self-esteem can be impacted if they compare themselves with others and think less of themselves. Research shows that media can have a negative impact on children's body image from a young age.

**Children's self-esteem can be affected by stresses at home such as parents fighting or problems at school with learning, friendships or bullying.**

### If there has been a lot of change

If children have had a lot of changes, eg coming from another country, family break-up, or moving house or schools a lot, it can help to:

- hold on to family routines and rituals as much as possible
- keep a diary with photos of where they have been
- let them know about their family history. If the family has broken up, keep them in touch with both sides if possible. Adopted children can have 2 sets of 'roots'.

Teenagers are often interested in their early childhood as part of working out who they are.



## How parents can enhance children's self-esteem

Parents can enhance children's self-esteem through the interactions they have every day.

### Show your love

- Talk to your baby as you are going about your chores. See the world through their eyes and show delight in what interests them.
- Tell your child you love them; give hugs, cuddles and smiles. Do this often, not just when they do something that pleases you.
- Let them see your love is constant and doesn't depend on their successes. Show them you are glad they are who they are.
- Enjoy spending time with your child. This says they are important and builds their sense of worth. Do what they like to do, eg play games they like.
- Go to children who are playing happily on their own, before they seek you out. This shows you care about them.
- Show respect by talking to your child in a way you would want to be spoken to. Listen to your child and take them seriously. Show you understand their feelings and point of view.

### Help children feel they belong

- Help your child to know their relatives, family history and culture so they have a sense of being part of something bigger.
- Expect them to contribute to family life in line with their age and ability, eg feeding pets, setting the table, cleaning the car. This says they are needed and belong in your family. As they get older you could ask their advice, eg with technology.
- Seek children's views and ideas on family matters. Make sure they feel valued and heard.

- Take photos of your child as they grow up so they see how important they are to you. Children and teens love to go through photos and re-live memories. Keep mementos of important milestones in their lives.
- Create family rituals, eg stories at bedtime, the way you say goodbye and other ways of doing things that are special to your family.
- Make their friends welcome in your home and get to know them.

### Nurture feelings of mastery and competence

- Help children feel successful. When children know they are good at something it builds their confidence and inner motivation for learning.
- Help them take small steps at first. Make sure tasks are not so difficult they become discouraged, or so easy they get bored.
- Notice your child's strengths and focus on them. Acknowledge the times they are kind or brave or put in the effort to do something difficult.
- Help children to help other people. They learn they can make a difference.
- Help children understand it is OK to be good at some things and not so good at others.
- Don't insist they practise over and over what they are not so good at. Children need to practise and enjoy their strengths to feel successful. Confident children usually try harder in most situations, and are better able to tackle things that are harder for them.
- Take an interest in what children are learning at school. Support their learning without taking over.
- When you play games with your primary school-aged child, make sure they have opportunities to win. If they win sometimes it's easier to learn to cope with losing sometimes too.

### Support problem solving

- Children learn by doing and this includes not getting it right all the time. Remind them it's OK to make mistakes; they are for learning from.
- Don't solve all children's problems for them. Show you have faith in them. Help them learn they can work things out and ask for help when they need it.
- Help children work through feelings of frustration or disappointment.



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**When children feel competent in things that matter to them it builds their confidence and self-esteem. They are more likely to enjoy challenges and achieve their goals.**  
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### **See 'misbehaviour' as a chance for learning**

When children 'misbehave' it is usually because they have not fully developed the skills they need to do what you expect.

This is a great opportunity to help children learn.

You could:

- help them calm down if they are upset
- help them name their feelings. Tell them all feelings are OK, even difficult ones
- see things from their point of view and show you understand
- help them work out solutions to the situation. Ask for their ideas and come to an agreement that works for both of you. Remind them of their strengths, eg kindness, fairness, creativity, persistence, bravery. How could they use them in this situation?
- support them to practise skills.

The more you do this, the better children will become at problem-solving and managing their emotions and behaviour. Their self-esteem will grow as they feel a sense of control.

### **Use praise effectively**

Your approval and praise is important to children. However, sometimes children can learn to do things for the praise or reward rather than the inner satisfaction that comes from doing something well. When children rely on others for approval they can avoid doing things they might not succeed at, and their self-esteem reduces.

It works best to:

- focus praise on children's efforts. This helps them learn they can achieve if they persist, eg 'I can see how much work you put into your project'
- be specific about what they did well so they know what to do next time, eg instead of saying 'You are so good at drawing', say 'I like all the details in your drawing; you've even drawn Mum's hat'
- ask children what they like about their efforts. Reflecting on their work helps build inner motivation
- focus on how they have improved and avoid comparing them with others.

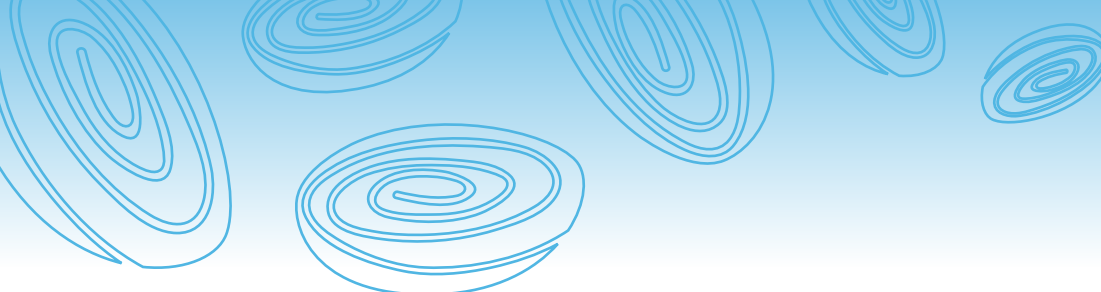
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**Use praise effectively by focussing on children's efforts and what they did well. This works better than general or inflated praise.**  
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## **Messages that damage children's self-esteem**

When parents:

- ignore children and don't take an interest in them
- frown or sigh when they want to talk to you or ask you for something. This suggests it's too much effort to give them your time
- constantly nag them
- embarrass, tease, shame or make fun of them
- give the message that you do not like your child, eg 'I love you but I don't like you'
- say something bad about them as people, eg 'You are... lazy, untidy, naughty, a nuisance, a bully, shy, a sook'
- compare them with others, especially brothers and sisters and suggest they are not as good
- give the message that life would be better without them, eg 'If it weren't for the children we could have a good holiday or 'I wish you hadn't been born'
- threaten to leave them or give them away if they do not do as you wish.





## What parents can do for young people

- Make sure adolescents and teenagers know you love them, even if there are arguments. Show them in different ways and tell them often. They may ‘shrug-off’ what you say but they take in your message. If you compliment them and they say ‘You’re just saying that because you’re my mother/father and you’re biased’, don’t be put off. You could say ‘Well I am your mother/father and I’m very proud you’re my son/daughter’. These messages matter.
- Expect some help at home as part of belonging to your family. This says they are valued and needed.
- Keep young people involved in the family. Expect them to attend family occasions even if they don’t stay long.
- Listen to their views without always having a better or wiser answer. Help them explore their own ideas. They don’t have to have the same opinions as you. Ask for their help or advice sometimes.
- Show you have faith in them and encourage them. Be interested in what interests them. Help them have goals in life.
- Support them to try new activities and develop and practise skills that are important to them.
- Make sure they have other trusted adults to talk to. Young people need adults and mentors who can guide and inspire them and help them build skills in areas of interest.

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**Show you have faith in your child. Don’t step in straight away and solve their problems. Provide guidance and support as needed.**

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## Parents’ self-esteem

It is important to look after your own self-esteem too.

- Let your children see you feeling good about yourself, learning new skills and improving with practice.
- Model optimistic and positive thinking.
- Avoid negative self-talk such as complaining about your body or looks.
- Take time out for yourself and do things you enjoy; join a team, go for a walk, read a book.
- Spend time with supportive friends who help you feel good. If you have a partner, make time to spend together.

## Getting help

If you are concerned about your child you can talk with their school, a doctor or other health professional. Getting help early can prevent things becoming worse.

### Want more information?

#### Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child health and parenting

#### Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon to Fri for an appointment.

See [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com) for child health and parenting information

#### KidsMatter

Information for parents and schools about developing confidence, resilience and coping skills [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au)

#### Raising Children Network

Information about raising children including developing self-esteem and resilience [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

#### Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including ‘Coping skills (resilience)’, ‘Children’s mental health’, ‘Living with toddlers’, ‘Living with young people’ and ‘What is your parenting style?’ [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)





**Government  
of South Australia**

**Parenting SA**

A partnership between the Department for  
Education and the Women's and  
Children's Health Network.

**Phone: 08 8303 1660**

**Web: [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

**Important:** This information is not intended  
to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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