

10 Steps to Self-Esteem

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[This is the second article in the first issue (Volume 1, Number 1) of Glenn Latham's *Parenting Prescriptions* magazine. As one of the four Founders of TIBI and a *Behaviorology Today* staff writer, Dr. Latham's work has appeared in the pages of this journal before. We are thankful to have received permission to occasionally reprint one of his helpful, science-based practical articles, like this one, for parents and other child caregivers. (Readers can obtain all four issues of *Parenting Prescriptions* magazine through the "Products" section of www.parentrx.com which is the web site that Glenn established as an information resource.)—Ed.]

Among the many good things parents want for their children, a high regard for self is at or near the top. Parents frequently ask, "What can we do to make our children feel good about themselves?" Parents then express concern about children who mope around the house, complaining about their inadequacies, feeling afraid to try new things, and despairing that they have no friends.

To some degree, this kind of behavior is to be expected. Occasionally, we all feel unattractive and have self-doubts. As parents, however, we need to be careful that we don't inadvertently contribute to our children's sense of low self-esteem by giving it the wrong kind of attention or by actually saying or doing things that make our children wonder about their abilities or worth.

To help build your children's self-esteem, you should regularly do the following:

1. **Do and say things that let your children know that you feel good about yourself.** Smile a lot, be happy, and laugh. Children need a model of what self-esteem looks like and sounds like. You need to show your children that you believe in yourself.
2. **Do and say things to your children that show you highly regard them and their abilities.** In fact, look for opportunities to build your children's self-esteem. To remind you to say nice things to your children, put a plant or a picture out of place. Every time you see this object out of place, you will remember to say something nice to your children. You should also show your children that you respect their opinions. Ask your children for their opinion and then try to implement their suggestions.

3. **Set reasonable standards for your children's behavior.** Appropriately acknowledge when your children accomplish these standards. By doing this, you establish a healthy model of self-esteem.
4. **Continue to compliment your children even if they do not seem to appreciate what you say.** Although your children may not thank you for complimenting them, you must continue to notice and comment on their good behavior. A cold, stormy look can hide a child's warmth on the inside.
5. **Never!, I repeat, never! put your child down or use sarcasm.** Do not indulge in humor at the expense of your children. Although you may think your children understand that you are kidding, they may believe that you secretly mean the things that you are saying.
6. **When children say disparaging, uncomplimentary things about themselves, acknowledge those feelings with empathy and love, but press for a solution.** Do not try to convince children that they really don't feel a certain way or that they are just having a bad day. To children, these feelings are as real as life. Use empathy and understanding and offer to help your children. Avoid giving quick-fix advice; help your children find real solutions. The wisdom of age typically doesn't cut it with children. If you are unable to help, seek help from professionals, clergy, or knowledgeable friends or family.
7. **Put failure into perspective.** Failure is a part of life. Often we can turn an event that seems like a failure into a success simply by changing the way we look at the event. For example, a child attempts a task and fails. Rather than focusing on the failure, you can say, "What can you do to make sure you succeed next time?"
8. **Teach your children private speech.** Private speech is consciously saying esteem-building things to yourself, particularly at times of risk. For example, suppose a friend says something harsh or negative to your child. Rather than allowing this negative statement to make him or her feel bad, you can teach the child to say something like the following: "My friend said something mean to me, but later this same friend asked me to play. This made me feel good."
9. **Help your children learn to assess cause and effect.** Assessing actual causes helps your children explain, in a specific way, why something happened and helps them avoid the tendency to engage in generalizations. For example, rather than assuming that "I failed the test because I am stupid," children should realize that the cause is very specific: "I failed the test because I wasn't as prepared as I should have been."
10. **Teach self-control and self-reinforcement.** You should teach children to engage in alternative behaviors when events disappoint them or make them feel depressed. For example, if a child gets teased while

she is playing with friends, she could smile, walk away, and count to ten. Then, the child could find someone else to play with.

After choosing an alternative behavior, children should verbally reinforce themselves for behaving well. In the example above, the child could say to herself, "Good job. I knew I could do that." ☺

