

Your Village: Parenting Beyond Discipline

#2: How to Support & Build Kids' Self-Esteem Transcript

Erin: Hello and welcome to this week's episode of Parenting Beyond Discipline, the place to learn about ALL things parenting and get your questions answered. I'm your host, Erin Royer-Asrilant.

Today I'm talking about self-esteem! What it is and how we can help our kids develop true, solid self-esteem. First, I'll cover some statistics on self-esteem as it relates to our kids, talk about the definition, the benefits, and where self-esteem comes from. Then I will quickly share and the shift in society that happened with trying to build self-esteem that went awry and what we can do to fix it with some ways to foster a true, healthy and sense of self esteem in our kids.

First, some statistics on self-esteem. Research shows that on average, girls' self-esteem peaks at age 9. NINE! As a mom of a daughter, this is truly frightening to me. But looking back at my own life, this probably held true for me, personally, up until my mid-20s. I then spent my mid 20s and even into my early 30s, working hard to turn this all around. I don't want my daughter to have to do that. I want her to have the time and the confidence to go out and do great things rather than spending those years trying to build herself up. More than twice as many girls with low self-esteem than those with high self-esteem engage in sex prior to 9th grade. 70% of girls struggle with low self-esteem in the areas of body image, school performance and/or peer and family relationships. 75% of girls with low self-esteem engage in negative activities such as bullying, smoking, drinking, self-harming, and/or disordered eating, these are things like bingeing and purging or severe food restriction. While self-esteem seems to affect girls much more prevalently than boys, self-esteem issues in boys have tripled from 15% to 45% in the recent years. These are some pretty alarming statistics that I would really like to see be reversed.

The definition of healthy self-esteem is a realistic, and appreciative view of the self. I want draw attention to the word realistic here. Someone can believe they are the whole bag chips with guacamole on the side. (I don't know, I just made that up. It works right?) But if their self-view is not realistic, then it's not true self-esteem. It's narcissism! I'll get back to this in a few minutes. Self esteem is also a faith in one's ability to handle life's challenges. So again, self-esteem is a realistic, and appreciative view of the self as well as faith in our own ability to handle life's challenges.

It stems from 3 places: the first is mastery, which is accomplishment and effort that comes from setting and achieving goals. We set a goal and accomplish it, we master a new skill, we get self-esteem from that. The other place self-esteem comes from is a Strong sense of belonging/being needed. So you can see how parents and families can have a big influence in this area. Lastly, it comes from having an affect on the world around us. This starts in infancy. When a baby gets that ball to roll or mom to smile or laugh, that's huge! Those experiences begin to shape baby's self-esteem in a very positive way!

Obviously, there are many benefits to healthy self-esteem and we all know some of them. But I'll go through them just to re-iterate it's importance and some areas of which everyone may not be aware. People and kids with solid self-esteem gain more enjoyment from peer relationships and generally enjoy and engage well in both group and individual activities, they are more willing to try to new things and rise to meet challenges. They have better self acceptance - meaning when they don't do well at something they can accept areas where they aren't as strong or can rise up to meet that challenge and work harder so they are more resilient. They tend to be more optimistic. People with healthy self esteem assume more responsibility and ownership of their own behaviors rather than always blaming others when things don't go well. They Handle conflict better, resist negative peer pressure and have a strong sense of industry, an "I can do it" attitude. They have the foundation to do well both academically and socially and actually studies show achievement scores and grades increase with increased self-esteem. Of course, positive or negative, self-esteem becomes a self-feeding cycle. If you feel good about yourself, you try new things, you learn new things, you accomplish things and you increase your self-esteem. Of course, the opposite holds true as well.

So there was a big shift that started somewhere around the mid 1980s, in trying to make children feel good about themselves. Dr. Martin Seligman discusses this in his book, the optimistic child. This was done through a cultural shift, The idea was that if we tell kids they are good and smart, they will feel good. Give everyone a trophy. Some schools even went so far as to get rid of national honor society so some kids wouldn't feel left out. But this idea has failed miserably. It has backfired because children instead have tended towards developing a false or inflated sense of self, not based on abilities, skills, talents or hard work, but based on just being in the world. In the goal to build higher self esteem, Modern society has ended up working against its own best interest by taking away a lot of these components that build true self esteem. I think things have started to shift back slightly but we still have a lot of work to do. Not everyone is going to be good at everything and that's OK. But it also has to be OK to get recognition in areas where we do well. I also think part of the problem is, some

areas of intelligence or skill are valued higher than others. But that's a talk for another episode! The basic point here is that self-esteem has to be built and a lot of it has to come from the individual. We can support and give opportunities but it has to be earned. We can't fill our kids up with it. It just can't be given. But before I get into some of the many ways to foster positive self-esteem in kids, I'm going to talk about one last piece that is important to understand to have the entire picture and that is the continuum of self-esteem.

We tend to think of low self-esteem as bad and high as good. but actually there is also inflated self-esteem like I just mentioned, which you can probably already see has just as many negatives as low self-esteem. So let me walk you through the areas of each of these. Starting with definitions. The definition of low self-esteem is, a low or deflated sense of self, for healthy self-esteem it is realistic and positive self view and inflated is a view of self-importance. There is also a difference in self talk for each of these. Someone with low self esteem often tells himself, "I'm stupid, I can't do anything right" or "nobody likes me." Someone with healthy self esteem may think "I work hard and I have skills to show for it." While someone with inflated self esteem tends to think along the lines of "I'm better than everyone else. I'm awesome regardless of what I accomplish." There was an incident that came out about a year ago where the youngest hilton threw a fit on a flight, calling the passengers "peasants" along with some profanity, and allegedly exclaiming "My father will pay this out, he has done it before. Dad paid \$300,000 last time," This is a perfect example of that overinflated sense of self. There is also a difference in focus. Someone with low self esteem will tend to focus on not making mistakes. someone with healthy self esteem will focus on growth and improvement, while a person with inflated sense of self will focus on winning, staying on top and being right.

You might already be able to see how this whole picture is starting to play out. In regards to the cultural shift I mentioned, you can probably see how the effort of trying to stuff kids with self-esteem "you're so great! I'm so proud of you! Here's your sticker for listening! Here's your trophy for showing up!" has resulted in a generation of kids with an overinflated sense of self.

There's a big important piece to this on encouragement versus praise but we'll run out of time and I want to get to some ideas for fostering healthy esteem as well as get to answer some of our parents' questions. We do have a blog post on this, on the website called encouragement versus praise, as well as a podcast coming in the next couple of weeks where I will cover that more in depth.

So I know we have parents with a vast range of ages of kids from infants all the way through teens so, while there are LOTS of ways to support self-esteem at every age, I'm going to brush the surface but hit on some ideas for each age, so we are sure to have something for everyone!

For kids of ALL ages and even adults, having a sense of belonging and being needed builds self-esteem. This means things like, unconditional love. I love you no matter what. This doesn't mean we always approve of our child's behavior or that bad behavior or choices are OK. But when our kids do mess up the message we want to send is, the child is good, but the behavior needs work. Whenever I get mad at my kids or we sit and have a coaching session about their behavior I always, ALWAYS, close with "I love you." I tell them "Even when I'm mad or disappointed I still love you." Then we work helping the child make better choices. I talk a lot about this in my discipline classes, how to discipline for the behavior and maintain the relationship. You want to maintain that relationship.

Another important one for all ages, is allow room for mistakes. Albert Einstein said, "Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new." Kids makes lots of mistakes! But allow them to make them. It's tough to permit your three-year old to pour his own milk when you know he is sure to make a spill, but grit your teeth and do it! He'll feel great for having tried, just so long as you don't overreact when he gets a less than perfect result. When mistakes happen – explain and discuss or coach rather than shaming. Allow your child to share what she could do next time. If she doesn't know, then you can share your thoughts. Recognizing mistakes as opportunities to do better the next time. Otherwise, your child will become afraid to make mistakes and therefore pull back from challenging herself in the future. Like I discussed, being open to challenges builds self-esteem so we want to keep this alive!

When it comes to infants and early toddlers, as I already mentioned, having that affect on the world is huge. They love to move the rattle and make the sound, crinkle toy that makes that noise, roll the ball, make you laugh or smile. So give lots of opportunities for this, to connect with you and get reactions from you as well as play with all of those amazing infant and toddler toys out there!

Soon they are driven to sit and crawl and walk, which does 2 things, it creates the sense of accomplishment AND gives that many more opportunities to affect the world!

For toddlers and preschoolers, this would be ages 1 1/2-4. In general, at this age self-esteem is based on how the child expects to be accepted and valued by adults and

peers, what we call social connectedness. They are learning to play well, how to have good experiences with peers.

Toddler-proof your house! Anything you don't want your toddler to have or play with or touch or have a temper tantrum over, toddler-proof for that! The reason is, toddlers are natural scientists and explorers. They want to explore! They HAVE to explore. So besides being exhausting for the parent, if a toddler hears no and don't and stop, all day long, it can begin to work against the development of that healthy self-esteem.

Support healthy risk taking and trying new things. If your child is a climber take her to a park with area that is safe for younger kids to explore climbing!

Set and teach limits. This comes in with curbing overindulgence and that sense of entitlement that goes along with the overinflated sense of self. So if you don't want your child climbing onto the kitchen counter or the table. Set that limit and use positive discipline, coach, give choices, "you may climb on your step stool or on your climber outside." Then if he doesn't comply (which most likely he won't!) then you can set a consequence of removing the means of climbing or that you will have to put up the baby gate and he will have to stay in the other room while you finish cooking" or whatever the situation may be. If you need more guidance for positive discipline, you can see the classes on our website YourVillageOnline.com.

For elementary age kids this is ages 5-10; take interest in their interests. Ask questions about your child's interest, such as "what is your favorite dinosaur, planet, art medium or whatever?" or "tell me what you like about art, music, soccer, space?" get her into art, dance or whatever class, if she asks or shows an interest or aptitude. My oldest son is a complete Star Wars fanatic. He wanted to start a Star wars and asked if I wanted to join. What could I say? Of course I said yes. He brought a signup form complete with questionnaire that I had fill out and sign! I like star war and all but I did it with a happy heart because he was so excited about it. I had to share my area of interest in the club. So put down trivia. So now we ask each other Star Wars trivia questions. I know more than I ever wanted to know!

Have expectations and responsibilities. This covers 2 areas of self-esteems. We need to teach our kids that they are expected to be contributing family members, so this covers the being needed piece. Our kids should feel like, "This place couldn't get along without me! I do so much!" It also curbs the entitlement, you don't get something for nothing. We all pitch in and help. It can teach that privileges are earned, in whatever ways you decide to set these up for your family.

Encourage your child in all areas, academics, physical endeavors, the arts. Help your child find his/her gifts. But also be sure to do it with honesty. Don't placate. Kids know when you are patronizing. If the throw stinks don't tell your child it was awesome. Give constructive criticism and encourage him to keep working on it.

For kids of middle school age, 11-13, self-doubt is common at this age so setting unreasonable goals that lead to failure can have a lasting impact. So supporting self-esteem for kids in this age group is about helping kids navigate this. So help your child set reasonable goals - you know your child better than anyone. You know how persistent he is or is not. But if you see your child setting very high goals that you think could backfire, have a discussion and help your child pull back or set smaller intermediate goals for increase chance of success.

Set limits Make sure they are reasonable and are changing and loosening as your child grows. Be open to conversations about whether or not the limits are

Encourage problem solving. This means you don't want to rescue. If your child forgets her book at school she needed for homework. Have her problem solve ways to fix this. Can she borrow the book from a friend? Can she get to school early the next day? Turn it in late for less credit? If your son forgets to take his lunch, he can problem solve. You may be thinking, what does this have to do with self-esteem?! Where it builds self-esteem is the problem-solving, the independence, the I can do this on my own, I can figure it out! If you constantly rescue your child becomes more dependent and reliant on you rather than less.

For kids of high school age, 14-18, continue to set limits, making sure they are reasonable. Be open to conversations about whether or not the limits are appropriate and be willing to loosen them if your child shows he is responsible.

Use mistakes for teaching. Use mistakes as opportunities for teaching how to make better choices. Sometimes the mistake may provide an opportunity for learning for both of you. Make it more of a conversation rather than a lecture. Ask how he feels. Share how you feel. Ask what he learned, what he would do differently. It doesn't mean there is no consequence. You can still give a consequence (or there may be an outside consequence). If you feel a consequence at home is appropriate, your teen may even be able to help come up with a fitting consequence.

These are only a few of the many, many ways I share about fostering healthy self-esteem. I have so many I had to divide it into 2 classes one for children 0-5 and one for kids 5+. I share more on the development of self-esteem by age and then a lot more ideas and ways. So if you are interested in learning more, you can see the self-esteem classes on our website.

Now for 2 of the parenting questions that came in this week:

Brenda asks "My 6 year-old son seems to fall apart quite easily, like when his best friend couldn't play the other day, he just fell to pieces. I kept hoping he would grow out of it but I feel like he's not very resilient. What can we do to help him?"

Hi Brenda,

This could be a long and involved answer and without knowing your son's reactions day to day, I only have a very small piece of the puzzle but I'll do my best to answer as completely as I can. Since you said you were hoping he would grow out of it, I'm going to assume this has been his pattern for most if not all of his life and that it's not due to any big changes or stressors in his life. So first, I will say that it sounds like your son may fall on the higher end of the spectrum for the temperament type called "feelings aware" In general, this temperament trait is the level of awareness of feelings for both self and others. A child who is high in feelings awareness has most or all of the following traits, very caring and sympathetic, Can use words to tell how he feels, tends to act on feelings rather than thinking things through, easily gets feelings hurt, sensitive to the feelings of others, including characters in books and media, stronger emotional reactions to music. So if this sounds like your son there are some things you can do to help him learn to regulate his emotion. I don't want to sound like being very emotional and sensitive is bad, it is not. It is a wonderful trait. But for kids like this, they do need to learn how to look at things logically as well as emotionally. So regardless of the source of his reactions, be they from being highly feelings aware, a lack of resilience or both, allow his feelings and use lots of empathy, "I understand you are feeling very sad that your friend can't play right now."

If you are totally recognizing your son in the descriptions I gave, here are some things you can do if you find he is reacting emotionally quite frequently, Help him slow down and think through the good and bad of different actions, reactions and choices rather than only responding emotionally. These are especially important if he tends to throw things or storms off. You will have to do a lot of coaching at first for different options, such as offering yourself as a sounding board so he can share his feelings of

disappointment. Then help him problem solve something else he can do, such as find a different friend to play with or an activity he enjoys doing on his own.

Also, remember that your highly feeling child is easily influenced by the feelings of others so while empathy is good, try to keep your frustrations with his reactions or to situation moderate to low.

Now I'll touch on resilience. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from life's disappointments. Resilience plays a big part in self-esteem as those low in resilience back down from life's challenges and don't try new things and therefore don't set goals or grow the accomplishments and skills piece like those high in resilience. Does he take it hard when he doesn't achieve something he put his mind to? Does he give up easily on tasks, be they chores, or sports or school work? Do you hear negative self talk such as "This is too hard!" "I can't do this!" "I'm bad at..." fill in the blank. Then it is a resiliency issue. Some things you can do to increase resilience would include giving him small challenges that are just at or slightly stretch his current abilities, be it a puzzle, a physical endeavor like rock climbing or swim lessons, a book to read, anything that can give him practice at working towards a goal and completing it, which builds that accomplishment piece of self-esteem.

Give positive feedback in the form of encouragement when he does complete something new "You kept working on the puzzle until you finished!" or "You studied until you learned all the spelling words. That shows commitment!" "You went all the way across the monkey bars without stopping! You've never done that before!" Give him LOTS of opportunities to practice setting goals and reaching accomplishments. If you recognize your son in the description of the high feelings aware, I recommend you check out the class on temperament as I give a lot of ways to help work on this.

Our next question comes from Sarah in Texas. Sarah says, "My 7 year-old daughter has never been particularly outgoing or boisterous. But she's always been very kind and friendly. She had a good friend from 1st grade who now is hanging out with another girl a lot and doesn't seem very interested in playing with Mila anymore. Mila actually says they are mean to her and it hurts her feelings. It really seems to be hurting her self-esteem. She gets lots of positive attention from us at home but I don't have control over her friends at school. Would this be considered bullying? I don't know what to do."

Hi Sarah, I'm really sorry to hear your daughter is going through this. I get questions very similar to yours frequently. This is a very tough area of parenting in areas where we

don't have the type of control over situations. But I have some good answers for you that can really help you and your daughter feel better.

First, it is very common for kids in elementary school to have what we call serial friendships or serial best friends. But it sucks when you are the one who left when the other has moved on. So it may or may not be bullying and my guess is, given the information you shared that it is most likely not. So first you want to ask your daughter how they are being mean. Don't give any leading answers just ask open ended questions like, "How are they mean to you?" "How do they hurt your feelings?" My guess is that it simply by feeling left out and not necessarily any outward nastiness. Rather this is a new friendship these 2 girls want to explore. So you will want to explain to Mila that her friend, has found someone that she's interested in getting to know right now. She may or may not come back to playing with your daughter more, but right now this is the way it is. Allow and support her feelings around that loss. But also help her problem solve finding a new friend or 2 that she can build a friendship with. Ask her to think of the other kids in her class who might have similar interests to hers, offer to invite them over or meet them out and help and support her to facilitate that new relationship.

Now if they are name calling, or telling her they don't like her and/or making derogatory statements about her, and it is repeated experience, then it falls under the bullying category, in which case, you will want to begin working with the school. I highly recommend our bullying class so you can get lots of ideas on how to help your daughter both at home and through the school.

Thanks everyone for tuning in today. If you would like to submit a question for next week's episode or other future episodes, you can send an email to Podcast@YourVillageOnline.com. You can also see what other topics we have coming up by visiting the page on our site, YourVillageOnline.com/Podcast. If you're loving what you're hearing on our podcast, please let us know by giving us a great review, and also, subscribing to our channel. If there is something you think we can do better or if there is a topic you would like to hear about, please send an email to Podcast@YourVillageOnline.com. Thanks so much everyone and I look forward to seeing you next time.