



Au Pair Extraordinaire

For parents who care

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Raising "I Can" kids – August 2010

by Justine Loewenthal

Self esteem is the value we place on ourselves and the collection of beliefs and feelings we have about ourselves. Healthy self esteem is the armour our children have against the sometimes harsh challenges of the world. Children who feel good about themselves find it easier to resist negative pressures, are generally happier and more optimistic than children with poor self esteem, and are able to handle conflict better. Children with poor self esteem, who believe they are no good and who 'can't', find it difficult to find solutions to problems, often withdraw and become depressed, and experience life's challenges as a major source of anxiety and frustration.

A child's most important teachers are his/her parents. Self esteem is also influenced by relationships with other people in the child's life – school teachers, peers, other family members and other adults.

The first step to helping your child build positive self esteem is showing them love and acceptance simply because they exist! Unconditional love and unconditional acceptance. Not acceptance that they have to earn through good behavior and kind words. Show affection and care through your actions and tell them often that you love them. Spend as much quality time with your children as you can. Why not leave notes in your child's lunchbox that read "I love you darling" or "I think you're powerful"?

Children need to feel as though they belong in the family and that they are important. This creates safety and certainty for them within their family, and making friends outside the family will be easier.

Apart from meeting a child's basic physical needs, it is also important to enforce discipline and set (and stick to) limits and boundaries, and follow through with consequences. Allowing a child to take responsibility for their actions by giving them choices empowers your child. It is important to ensure that your verbal and non-verbal messages give your child the same message.

Be respectful in the manner in which you talk to your children. Their self esteem is strongly influenced by what you say to them. Name calling and harsh words do not help them to build healthy self esteem. Show them that what they have to say is important by really listening and, if you don't agree, take the time to explain why instead of dismissing your child's point of view. Praise your children not only for a job well done, but also for the effort.

Be a good role model with positive self esteem. If you constantly criticize yourself and are pessimistic, your child may mirror you.

You can help your child develop healthy self-esteem by helping him or her cope with defeats, rather than emphasizing constant successes. During times of disappointment, your child's weakened self-esteem can be strengthened when you let your child know that your love and support remain unchanged. When the crisis has passed, you can help your child reflect on what went wrong. The next time a crisis happens, your child can use the knowledge gained from



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overcoming past difficulties to help cope with a new crisis. A child's sense of self-worth is not likely to deepen when adults deny that life has its ups and downs.

It is extremely important to give children support and approval. Children who have faith and confidence in themselves and their abilities will be more likely to lead happy and productive adult lives. Teach your children to learn from their mistakes, to work towards a goal, and to have pride in their successes. Encourage them to face challenges and take risks and express confidence in them and their capabilities. Give your child lots of opportunities to succeed!

If you suspect your child has unhealthy self esteem, seek professional help. Psychologists can help to identify underlying issues that are preventing your child from feeling good about himself or herself.

