

A number of teachers have written to me and stated that overcoming the negative self-concepts of their students is one of the most prevalent problems facing them in their classrooms today. This problem appears to be one that educators at all levels—from kindergarten to university—are experiencing. Students of various ages seem to be suffering from poor self-esteem and from the same basic problem of not liking themselves.

Regardless of the state of the child's self-esteem upon entering the school, the teacher can, as significant or salient other and controller of the classroom environment, provide psychological experiences from which each child can derive a positive sense of self-esteem. Pupils whose demeanour indicates low self-esteem need a teacher who will create a well-balanced educational environment that helps children develop their human potential. By cherishing and holding the child in absolute esteem, the teacher is establishing an environment that facilitates growth and becoming.

TEACHER BEHAVIOUR AND SELF-AFFIRMING EXPERIENCES

Teach children to praise themselves. A child's feelings of adequacy and self-acceptance are central to the success of the whole educational process. When children feel good about themselves, their motivation is higher and they become more involved in everything they do. As a result, they retain and make use of what they learn over a longer period of time.

By using methods such as cross-age tutoring, group work, and activities fostering positive social interaction—teachers can increase the sources of positive impact and affirmation available to children in the classroom. The teacher who wishes to help children develop self-esteem in the classroom environment should:

- Recognise and affirm the value of each child.
- Be a positive model—by praising yourself in front of your pupils. This will help the children to internalise a positive value judgment.
- Remember that the fundamental basis for acquiring self-esteem in the classroom is the reflection of self as an achiever.
- Help children verbalise successes so that the making of positive statements will become more automatic. 'I played a fair game today' or 'My craft/art work was good' and so on.
- Help children learn to value the assessment of their performance and products by establishing a clear,

New Activities for Building Self-Esteem

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positive relationship between evaluative processes and achievement.

- Model the proper use of self-criticism and self-reward.
- Clearly communicate and interpret the standards used for evaluating pupils' performances and products in the classroom.
- Help children acquire, and allow them to use, evaluative skills.
- Make individual improvement the value underlying competitive activities in the classroom.
- Associate teacher praise and criticism with specific elements of the children's performance, reinforcing the positive aspects and providing a basis for improving negative aspects of children's work.

A RESPONSE TO TEACHERS' REQUESTS

In the letters I received from teachers I noted that the following request was often repeated:

'Could you suggest some areas of self-concept development, and share with us a few specific exercises to help our students build positive self-concept and higher levels of self-esteem?'

In response to teachers' requests, some general areas are suggested for children in primary schools. There are

three areas essential to the development of the self-concept, and they are as follows: *the sense of belonging, a sense of competence, and a sense of worthwhileness.* So teachers might consider each of these areas and the specific exercises designed to meet the needs within these areas.

BELONGING

All of us want to belong, to be liked, to be valued and to be cared for. We seek affirmation of our existence from others. We have a need to share who we are and touch the lives of others. We need to discover our basic unity as well as our uniqueness. This can only be done in a group. Therefore, one of our first goals in developing self-concept is the promotion of what is called group rapport. There are many methods that have been developed to help children to learn to overcome their initial reservations about self-disclosure and to discover the basic humanity that is common to themselves and their classmates.

Teachers might use the following activities which are designed to help establish a feeling of positive rapport in the classroom. They will increase each child's sense of belonging. Perhaps a good activity to begin with is one that emphasises a sense of identity by using the children's names.

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Names help to individualise people, and a child's concept of self is built up from having a name that is reasonably different from others. Names also give a sense of belonging as they connect to a family with a past. They are passed down from generation to generation, and at one time had literal meanings, for example: Peter—rock, Phillip—a horse-lover, Miller—a grinder of grain, Cooper—a barrel-maker and Margaret—a pearl.

- The teacher might draw her family tree and discuss it as an example of 'belonging' to someone in the present as in the past.
- Discuss the functions of a name, and ask children to find out the names of their parents and grandparents.
- Research the meaning of given names and surnames, and the reasons for the names chosen, for example 'Were you named after anyone?' 'Why?'
- Allow pupils to draw up a family tree, or use photographs. (Be sensitive to children from broken homes as the exercise lies not so much in tracing the family as in determining relationships.)
- Collect a list of the grandparents', parents' and children's names. Make generalisations, for example 'Many names are fashionable for a particular reason—Diane, Charles, Olivia, Elizabeth, Mark . . .'

The Name Game

This two-part exercise has several learning goals. It can be used to help in learning others' names, and to establish positive feelings towards oneself and one's classmates. In the event that the children are already well acquainted, start with part 2.

- 1 Have the class sit in a circle. Begin by saying (for example) 'I am Sister Fahey'. The first child on the right says 'I am Jacqui and that is Sister Fahey'. Continue the process around the circle until the last child has repeated everybody's name.
- 2 The second time around, in addition to their name each person must add something that he or she is good at. For example: 'I am typing Sister Fahey', 'I am ballet-dancing Jacqui, and that's typing Sister Fahey.', 'I am football-playing Brendan, that's ballet-dancing Jacqui, and that's typing Sister Fahey', and so on around the circle.

Autobiographical Sharing

Ask the children to sit in a circle or in small groups. Tell them that each child has two or three minutes to share with

the group an autobiographical sketch of his or her life. Ask the children to share some *important* experiences of their lives. (The teacher might share the first one in order to model the behaviour and to encourage trust and mutual self-disclosure.)

Success Sharing

Another way to help children focus on their positive aspects is to have them publicly share their accomplishments with the group. In small group of five or six, or with the entire class, ask the children to share with their a group a success, accomplishment or achievement they had before they were 7 years old. Next ask them to share a success they had between the ages of 7 and 10; then from the age of 10 to the present. (Obviously, the age ranges will depend on the ages of the children in your class.)

At first some children may have difficulty remembering some of their earlier successes but, as others share theirs, it will trigger their minds. Children with extremely low self-concepts often report that they haven't had any successes. If this happens, you will need to prompt them, for example: 'Have you ever done messages for your mother? You bought the goods, paid for them and saved your mother's time—I consider that an accomplishment, don't you?' Or 'Can you remember the first time you learnt a game, or to ride a bicycle? Did you feel good about that achievement?'

Strength Bombardment

Have the children break up into groups of six or eight. Focus on one person at a time; the group bombards him/her with all the strengths they see in that person. The person being bombarded should remain silent until the group has finished. The teacher or a member of the group should act as recorder, listing the strengths and giving them to the child when the group has finished. At the end of the activity ask the children to discuss how they felt giving and receiving positive feedback. Was one easier than the other? Which one?

To reinforce the activity, have the children also ask their parents to list the strengths they see in them.

Often make the following useful distinction between evaluative and appreciative feedback. Evaluative feedback is characterised by judgement: 'You are a good artist', 'This is an interesting story', 'You are humorous'. Appreciative feedback is characterised by letting the child know how you, as a person, have been affected by what they have done. Examples of appreciative feedback are: 'I enjoyed your paintings, the colours you used made

me feel happy.' 'I enjoy your humour, you always help to cheer me and my class . . .'

Try as much as possible to use appreciative feedback with the children in both formal and informal situations. Try discussing this distinction with the children and encourage them to also use appreciative rather than evaluative feedback with each other. The key to the difference is that most evaluative feedback starts with the work 'you'; most appreciative feedback starts with the word 'I'.

FEELING COMPETENT

All of us need to feel that we are competent, that we can do things well, and that we can successfully meet our needs in the world. Most of us are very competent in many areas that we take for granted and that we have failed to learn to appreciate properly. Again, because of our negative focus, we have been taught to focus on what we have not yet mastered. We have all heard the story about the student who brings home a report card with four As and one B. The parent's response is 'What's this B doing here?'

The first step in learning to feel competent is to focus on what we already can do well, have done well and are doing well right now. Once a positive psychological base is developed the child can then branch out and take risks in new areas that he or she would like to become competent in.

The following activities are designed to help children focus on the sense of competence—to help them acknowledge their past achievements, to set realisable goals and to accomplish them.

Pride Line

Pride is related to self-concept. People enjoy expressing pride in something they've done that might otherwise have gone unrecognised. Our culture does not encourage such expressions and it is sometimes difficult for people to actually say 'I'm proud that I . . .'

Ask the children to make a statement about a specific item, beginning with 'I'm proud that I . . .' (Children may say 'I pass' if they wish.) Below are some suggested topics.

- 1 Games I played at home or school.
- 2 How you got your pocket money.
- 3 Things you have done for parents or friends.
- 4 Something you often do.
- 5 About your religious belief.
- 6 Something you won.

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Success-a-day

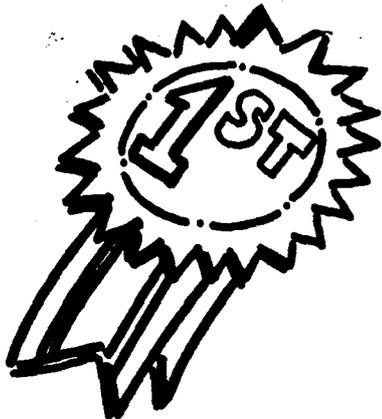
At the end of each day, have children briefly share with the rest of the class the successes they have experienced during the day. (The sensitive teacher will look for successes to be pointed out to the child with extremely low self-esteem.)

Success Symbols

All of us have symbols of success, things that remind us of our past successes. Have the children bring in three tangible objects that recall or symbolise some past success or accomplishment they have had (photographs, ribbons, ticket stubs, plaques, autographs and so on).

A variation on the success symbol concept is to have the children list three success symbols they do not have, but would like to acquire in the next year, two years etc. This activity could be used in conjunction with goal setting. Be sure to discuss the choices or goals without judgment.

As a teacher look at your success symbols and see how many are visible. Consider how you might make them



a more integral part of your own environment.

The Goal-post

Decorate a bulletin board in the form of a football goal-post. Each day as the children come into class ask them to set a goal for that day or for that night at home. Record the goal on an index card and post it on the bulletin board below the cross-bars of the goal-post. At the end of the day, or the following day, ask all those who completed their goals to move their index card above the cross-bar. If you are working with a group, ask the children to share their goal, and how they completed it, with the group. This gives the goal-achievers

the attention of their peers as a reinforcement of their successful action.

Wishing

While wishes may often seem impossible and far-fetched, they are often expressions of real needs—such as the common need to be accepted by one's peers. Once wishes are expressed and recognised as normal, they can be used as a motivating force behind action. With the use of goal setting a child can begin to realise that, with action, a wish may be attained. Ask the children to imagine they had three wishes. What would they be? Ask them to imagine they had three wishes for someone they like very much. What would they wish for them? Did you ever have a wish come true? Tell about it. Is there anything you can do, besides just wishing, to help you get your wish?

FEELING WORTHWHILE

The following activities are designed to validate and affirm the children's thoughts and feelings as adequate and worthwhile. They also help children to form a clearer picture of their true identity—who they really are, not who they pretend to be.

A Feeling Thermometer

Feelings are like a thermometer: they often let us know what is happening to us, what we want and what is important to us. Get the children to draw a thermometer and work it with 'feeling' words rather than numbers. Ask children to pay attention to their feelings and make them on the thermometer. It could read—*sad, mad, unhappy, glad, happy, okay, just so-so, angry, lonely*...

Allow the children to express some of the strong feelings that everyone has once in a while. This can be done by completing one of the following sentences.

- I feel . . . (lonesome)
- I . . . baby birds (love)
- I feel . . . (happy)
- I . . . my best friend (like)
- Sometimes I feel . . . (scared, hopeless, lonely)
- Playing with my friends is . . . (fun)
- Excursions are . . . (exciting)
- When I am . . . I feel (tired)
- . . . (down)
- Sometimes I get . . . at (mad)
- my brother/sister/mother

On My Mind

Ask the children to pair up and draw a large profile or silhouette of one another's heads. Then they are to cut

out words, pictures etc that represent their personal thoughts, thus making a collage of their current concerns. Later these pictures can be shared with the class. This activity legitimises the private thoughts of each child as proper subject matter and as reasonable data to share, as well as allowing the teacher to see what the primary concerns of his or her pupils are. Another outcome is that children usually begin to realise that they are not alone in many of their concerns. The realisation that others share their concerns and feelings often helps children feel 'less weird', 'less strange' and more 'normal', thus enlarging their self-concepts.

Positive Feelings

Working with a small group or the whole class, ask the children to arrange their chairs in a circle so that everyone can see everyone else's face. Ask them to tell about something that makes them feel very good. You might first ask them to draw a picture or write a story about it and then share it in the circle.

A variation is to ask the children to share something they did that made someone else feel happy. You might start out by saying:

'Yesterday I told Christina that I liked the dress she was wearing. I thought the dress was very colourful. She smiled, and I think my comment made her feel good. Would you share with us something you have said or done for someone else that made him or her feel good? How did make that person feel good?'

Another variation is to ask the children to respond to the following:

'Can you think of something that a grown-up did or said to you this week that made you feel good? Could you share that thing with the group and tell us why it gave you a pleasant feeling?'

I Think, I Feel, I Want Game

Ask the children to turn to a partner and then sit facing the partner. Suggest that each child play the game by talking to the partner, starting each sentence with either 'I think', 'I feel' or 'I want'. The partners then discuss how it feels to talk starting each sentence with 'I'. The teacher might ask 'What happened?', 'Did you learn anything new about your classmate?', 'Did you discover anything new about yourself?' or 'What kinds of things did you learn?'

These are just a few of the exercises that have worked with children in primary classes. Try them, adopt them, invent new ones and experience the joy of seeing your pupils grow to believe in themselves and their ability to achieve their individual goals. It is a rewarding feeling for the teacher.