

SELF ESTEEM: UNDERSTANDING A COMPLEX PHENOMENA

INTRODUCTION:

Parents understand that a healthy self esteem is vital to their children's well being. They know that self esteem is somehow associated with their' children's current performance levels, their social development, their confidence levels, their ability to cope with failure, their ability to resolve conflicts, the manner in which they communicate with others and their ability to take appropriate risks. **But** just what do they look for, what is it they need to encourage, discourage, build up or supplement?

The problem is that our children's self esteem is a complex construct, most of which is an internalised set of perceptions, ideas and attitudes. Self esteem is very individualised and it is dangerous for parents to attempt to fit their child into a generalised 'normalised' self esteem framework. Individual children's personalities, experiential background, attributes and developmental characteristics contribute to their having uniquely individual self esteem.

The following model and explanatory comments drawn from an extensive examination of the literature and over ten years of implementing programmes directed at enhancing children's self esteem. It is offered in the hope that it will clarify for parents, their understanding of this complex characteristic of their children and to clarify what their role might be in enhancing their children's self esteem.

The organisation of this book and the activities included in it have been influenced by the following considerations.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CONSIDERING CHILDREN'S SELF ESTEEM NEEDS



CHILDREN'S SELF IMAGE:

- This represents the child's collected thoughts, perceptions, ideas, knowledge of who they are.
- It includes information related to :
 - their physical self (I look like ...)
 - their emotional self (I often feel ... I can experience these feelings.)
 - their social self (I make friends ... , I am/am not accepted by others)
 - their functional self (I can/cannot do ... academic, recreational tasks)
- A child's self image is ever changing. New experiences, developmental phenomena, changed circumstances will result in the child adding to, modifying, revising their self image. The development of self image begins long before children arrive at school and continues to develop throughout their life.

CHILDREN'S IDEAL IMAGE.

- This represents the child's collected thoughts, perceptions, ideas and knowledge of who or what they want to be. It represents their *goals, dreams, aspirations and expectations*.
- The child's ideal image is directly related to their self image. Many of their goals, dreams, expectations are set in place on the basis of their knowledge, perception of who they are.

EXAMPLES:

Self Image:

- I can catch a ball with with my Dad.
- I can tell a story to my Mum and Dad from a picture book.
- I have lots of fun with my brothers and sisters and cousins.
- I got 4 B's in my last report.

Ideal Image:

- I want to play T.Ball.
- I want to read.
- I want to make lots of friends at school.
- I want to get 5 B's in my next report.

- The ideal image is a significant motivational magnet. It is the pursuit of such goals, expectations etc. that encourages children to;

Have a go! To take acceptable risks.
 To use their potential. To cope with mistakes.
 To stick at tasks until they are completed.

- Healthy self esteem does not require children to actually reach every goal, expectation etc. They merely need to feel at any given time they are moving in the right direction. i.e. Towards their goals.

WHAT IS A HEALTHY SELF ESTEEM ?

- A child has a healthy self esteem when he/she has 'statement of mind' feeling, general sense of moving in the right direction towards goals, expectations, aspirations that are part of their ideal self image. In this situation children tend to :
 - Feel secure and confident.
 - Be appropriately motivated.
 - Have a valued sense of worth.
 - Have an appropriate perception of the consequences of their own behaviour.
- A child with healthy self esteem has access to accurate, positive, ongoing information about their self image. They are prepared to add to it, modify and review it.
- A child with healthy self esteem will have an ideal image that not only is comprised of Dreams and Aspirations but a significant number of realistic, attainable goals and expectations.
- A child with a healthy self esteem will continually be testing self, experimenting, taking appropriate risks to enrich both their self image and their ideal image.

THE KEY PROCESSES INVOLVED:

- Although the development of self esteem is a complex process two key processes have been identified.

1. Self Discovery

Children will build their self image and ideal image by having the opportunities to discover as much about their identities as possible. This requires them to have the opportunity to:

- Undertake new and novel learning experiences.
- Undertake challenge.
- Be involved in problem solving situations.
- Be involved in activities where 'it's okay to make mistakes and get things wrong'.
- Be involved in situations where they can push themselves to their performance limits.

2. Feedback from Significant Others

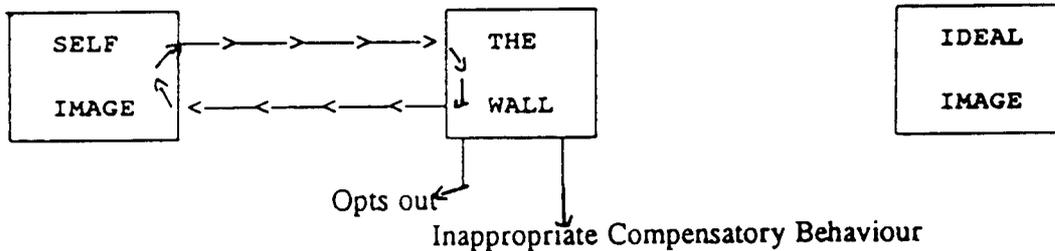
- All children need to review the self determined information they have about their self image and ideal image via the feedback they receive from significant others in their lives.

- Studies have indicated that for most children the following people represent the significant others they need access to :
 - Mum - Dad. Family members. (Brothers, sisters, Grandmother, Grandad etc.)
 - Teachers
 - The peer group.
- The aspect of 'self' a child is reviewing will determine the first 'significant other' they will seek out for feedback. However, whilst the order of choice will fluctuate children need to know that all sources of feedback are accessible if they need them.

'AT-RISK' SELF ESTEEM:

The Self Esteem Wall.

- If a child reaches the stage where they conclude:
 - I cannot meet the expectations that are part of my ideal image.
 - I will not achieve the goals that are part of my ideal image.
 - The dreams and aspirations that are part of my ideal image are meaningless.
 they can hit the SELF ESTEEM WALL.



- When a child hits the self esteem wall :
 - Performance motivation drops off.
 - Unnecessary and inappropriate self doubting can occur.
 - Social distancing can occur.
 - Inappropriate compensatory behaviour and risk taking can follow.
- Identifying children who might be at the self esteem wall :

Unfortunately children don't go up to parents and say: "Hey Mum - Dad guess what I'm at the wall !"

However, a number of behaviours they might be displaying could be telling parents just that message.

If a child is displaying any combination of the following behaviours it could be a strong indication that they have hit the self esteem wall.

- **A sudden change in their performance behaviour.**

This is often first reflected in a fall-off in the quantity of their responses. They write less, read less, do fewer sums, complete fewer assignments.

This fall-off in quantity is soon followed in a deterioration of the quality of their responses. An onset of careless errors, untidy work and disorganised responses is common.

- **A change in their social behaviour.**

This often begins with a change in their social interactions with their brothers and sisters. They attempt to distance themselves from their siblings wanting nothing to do with them. Sometimes this flows over to their interactions with Mum and Dad.

At school they may increasingly be opting out of group interactions with peers and playground interactions with peers. A child's comment to Mum and Dad of "no one at school likes me!" can be an indicator of this phenomenon.

- **A change in communication.**

Sometimes children who are at the self esteem wall display an onset of aggressive communication, put-down statements, pushing away language. This is often first directed at brothers and sisters, Mum and Dad and then flows over into the school situation and is directed at the child's peers and sometimes teacher.

- **A change in emotionality.**

Occasionally children who are at the self esteem wall show their frustrations and anxieties by displaying inappropriate emotional behaviour. This can include temper-tantruming, mood-swings, inappropriate crying, regressive behaviour (reversion to 'baby-like' behaviours).

- **Inappropriate diet.**

Children who are at the self esteem wall because they have concluded they are not able to reach social goals such as being accepted by their peer group sometimes conclude this is because of their physical image. When this is the case such children may display food deprivation or food excessiveness behaviour. This is more likely to occur with older primary children and adolescents.

- **Inappropriate sleep.**

Children who might be at the self esteem wall often have little time during their busy day to reflect on this situation whilst at school or immediately after school. For many the real anxieties, frustrations and uncertainties surface when they retire to bed. Such anxiety based reflection can interfere with their required healthy sleep. A consequence can be that they awake lethargic and not fully revitalised.

In considering the above indicators parents must exercise caution:

- A single indicator could be part of the child's normal coping behaviours. Parents should look for a combination of the above factors.
- Short episodes of the above behaviours is quite common for all children. If a child is at the self esteem wall they are likely to display the behaviours over a significant period of time.
- Parents of children who experience learning difficulties at school are well aware that they are susceptible of becoming failure oriented and thus sometimes hit the 'self esteem' wall at an early age.

HOWEVER

Children from an early age who lock into the pursuit of an 'ideal image' which they conclude requires them to achieve 100% success 100% of the time can also be at risk. Some such children internalise the belief that people expect them to perform according to this criteria, i.e. They become locked into the ideal of trying to please too many 'significant others' too much of the time.

I have termed such children the perfectionists. They are NOT to be confused with children whose 'ideal image' is strongly influenced by the pursuit of excellence.

- Children who HAVE an 'ideal image' that drives them to pursue goals that require them at appropriate times to utilise their maximum potential are not perfectionists. Children who have an 'ideal image' that drives them to pursue goals that require them to overachieve for significant periods of time are perfectionists. There is a danger that some such children hit the 'self esteem' wall even though they are currently achieving high grades; e.g. for such children a B Grade 70% could be interpreted as failure.

ENHANCING CHILDREN'S SELF ESTEEM : THE PARENTS' ROLE

- The key lies in the relationship between the children and their parents:
 - If children are to have a healthy self esteem, one in which they are comfortable in continuously adding to, modifying and reviewing their self image and ideal image, the relationship they have with their parents is all important. It is from this relationship that they will receive the following crucial messages:
 - My unique, individual self is valued.
 - I am understood.
 - It is okay to make mistakes.
 - I am trusted.
 - My self image and ideal image is respected.
 - When I am taking appropriate risks, experimenting and testing self, there is someone I can turn to for reassurance, support and consistent feedback.
 - The activities included in this book provide parents and their children the opportunity to share quality time.

▪ THE PARENTS' ROLE:

Some general considerations:

Source : Lawrence, D. (1988). *Enhancing self esteem in the classroom*. London : Paul Chapman.

- The specific activities included in this book will provide parents with a stimulus, focus to enhance various components of their children's self esteem. However, the activities **own** their own will accomplish little. The following considerations should accompany the utilisation of the activities.
 - Listen to your children. Let them know that you have heard what they say.
 - Praise and value them not just when they have had success but also when they are involved in activities where they are making mistakes, getting things wrong.
 - Ask their opinion on events, issues etc. so they feel their viewpoint is valued.
 - Share some of your past failings, mistakes with them so they conclude that they are not the only ones who get things wrong, that everyone, even Mum and Dad makes mistakes.
 - Arrange opportunities for them to share quality experiences with you at home; cooking a meal, cleaning the car, shopping, cleaning out the gutters, working on your stamp album, macrame with you. The idea here is the child concludes:
This is just Mum/Dad and I sharing an activity that is important to Mum/Dad.
 - Encourage the children's independence through giving them responsibilities. This will indicate to them that you trust them and value their contributions.
 - Emphasise to your children that you enjoy informal social talks with them. It's not just when they are in trouble or experiencing difficulties that you have time to talk with them.
 - Consistency is most important. Mum and Dad need to consistently model their values and standards to the children, even if they may not agree with them. This consistency provides a clearer reference point from which they will identify the values and standards that will contribute to their self image and ideal image.
 - Never criticise your children in front of others. If their behaviour needs review wait until in private and then ensure you take care in separating the behaviour you are critical of from the child you love.
 - Emphasise positive characteristics, especially those that might not in normal circumstances receive formal recognition from their teacher or their peers.
- e.g. I really like the way you speak to Gran.
It's so good to see the way you care about your baby brother.

▪ **REVIEWING OUR INTERACTION COMPETENCIES:**

A checklist for parents to monitor their relationship competencies.

- Being a parent is a demanding and time consuming task. Meeting the multitude of children's requirements, keeping the household in order and meeting our vocational responsibilities often results in our having little time to sit back and reflect on aspects of our interactive style. The following checklist may provide you with a focus for such a review. There is no **Excellent - Average - Poor** performance score involved. It is simply to be used as a source for reflection.

	YES	NO
1. Do you use eye contact when your children are talking with you?		
2. Do you smile a lot to your children?		
3. Is your voice harsh and aggressive when you are communicating with your children?		
4. Do you allow yourself to be distracted when your children are talking to you?		
5. Are you able to guess your children's feelings when they talk with you?		
6. Are you able to paraphrase your children's words to show them that you really heard what they said? i.e. Say back to them what they said to you.		
7. Are you able to show your children that you trust them ?		
8. Are you able to express your own feelings freely to your children?		
9. Do you children know the 'real' kind of person you are?		
10. Do you communicate to your children that you are interested in them as unique individuals?		
11. Do you find yourself using more negative than positive phrases?		
12. Do you use 'put-down' statements when communicating with your children?		

	YES	NO
13. Do you have a wide variety of positive phrases and words that you can use to reinforce your children?		
14. Do you place too many expectations on your children?		
15. Do you allow for your children to take appropriate risks?		
16. Are you aware of your children's dreams aspirations, goals, expectations?		
17. Do you promise to your children only those things that you can deliver?		
18. Are you able to say "No" to your children without guilt or fear?		
19. Are there times each day when you are accessible to your children to share quality time with them?		
20. Do you admit your errors and mistakes openly with your children?		

A Flip Side Look at Self-Concept

SYLVIA L. RHOADES and BEN STRICKLAND

Looking into a classroom on a beautiful morning in early spring, we see Susie looking outside, her thoughts apparently elsewhere.

"Susie, get to work!" her teacher snaps, frowning. "Quit wasting time!"

Susie is embarrassed. She's been put down, and she has the feeling, "The teacher doesn't like me."

The same scene is occurring in the room next door, where Joe's thoughts also are wandering out to the spring day, with his assignment lying neglected on the desk.

"Self-concept as the most important influence upon a student's achievement is a well-accepted principle in educational psychology because the evidence is overwhelming."

His teacher moves to his side and smiles. "Joe, you must be thinking some beautiful thoughts. You're a million miles away from us this morning."

Joe smiles, too, and picks up his notebook. He feels, "The teacher thinks I'm capable of thinking wonderful thoughts. She smiled. She likes me, even if I've been goofing off."

Teachers who regard the self-concept as important to learning are likely to react as Joe's teacher did and help students to maintain their self-esteem. These teachers know that the child's self-concept—how he feels about himself, about who he is and what he can do—is the most important factor in behavior and learning. Whether he can be happy,

well-adjusted, and successful depends upon whether he can see himself as that kind of person.

Self-concept as the most important influence upon a student's achievement is a well-accepted principle in educational psychology because the evidence is overwhelming. The bottom line is that students who learn to view themselves positively in the classroom are more successful not only as students but also as adults. Persons with a healthy self-esteem are better able to make a contribution to their community as well as to their classroom.

Teachers may be concerned about building self-concepts and yet wonder how to go about it. With all the individual differences existing among students, it is hard to know just what to do at times.

More is required than being pleasant and friendly, although that helps. It takes more than being sensitive and considerate, although that helps, too. How do we assist a classroom of students, each unique in some way, in building self-esteem?

At least part of the answer to this question lies in how we view each student. If students are seen only as being disruptive, we respond to them negatively. If, on the other hand, we view students as individuals with certain strengths as well as limitations, then we can respond to the strengths as well as the weaknesses.

Application of this approach could be a big order in some cases. For example, there is the problem of the class clown who continually disrupts proceedings, or the classroom bully who is constantly terrorizing fellow students. It is difficult to have a positive response to such students merely by willing it. Alas, would that we were capable of such superhuman behavior! In reality, we may perceive a misbehaving student as anything from Dennis the Menace to Attila the Hun!

Herein lies the problem. We need to develop a positive image of the child in our own minds before we can enable the child to see himself/herself in a positive light. How, then, can we learn to see our "problem" students more favorably?

Dr. Rhoades is Assistant Professor of Education at Texas Christian University at Fort Worth, Texas. Dr. Strickland is Professor of Education at TCU.

Let us consider some of these "problem" students that are found in almost every classroom. We have divided them into four categories: The Clown, The Bully, The Nitpicker, and The Doormat.

The Clown is the class show-off, the student who always wants to be on center-stage. He/she is the "smart-aleck" whose wisecracks interrupt instruction throughout the day.

The Bully is the toughie both on the school-ground and in the classroom. He/she pushes the other kids around, figuratively and literally. This is the student who always has to have his/her own way and gets it through intimidating others.

The Nitpicker is the rigid, compulsive student who particularly annoys fellow students (and the teacher) during classroom discussions by being overly critical of other students' opinions. He/she is stubborn and dogmatic, never recognizing the validity of an opposing viewpoint.

The Doormat is the student who gets manipulated, if not actually pushed around, by all these others. This is the passive, unassertive student who always follows someone else's lead and seems incapable of thinking or acting on his/her own. Teachers may react differently to this student, seeing him/her either as pathetic or as maddeningly wishy-washy.

Teachers, then, usually do not have positive reactions to any of these four types of students. Although we know that both behavior and learning can be influenced by increasing students' self-esteem, the problem may occur with Step One: How do we improve our *own* opinion of problem students?

We believe that teachers can learn to develop positive images by looking at the "flip-side" of student behavior, by looking for strengths as well as weaknesses, by training ourselves to see negative traits as representing aspects of personality and behavior that are potentially positive. Let us take the four categories of students and consider the "flip-side" of their characteristics.

First, the *Clown*. How could we make positive interpretations of this behavior? Let us give the student credit for trying to entertain everyone. Perhaps his/her comments could be seen as witty rather than smart-alecky. We can try to picture this student as talented or creative.

To apply our new perception, we will no longer attempt to cope with the *Clown* by ignoring him/her or by responding with exasperation or sarcasm. Instead, we can keep a sense of humor and laugh

along with the class when they find something funny. We can give sincere praise when possible for this student's originality.

The *Bully* may present more of a problem, as he/she is the least likable of the four categories. Is there a positive interpretation of being domineering and coercive? These traits are similar to those of a strong leader, who may be seen as forceful and influential, so we might help the student to develop abilities in the direction of leadership.

Instead of taking a "get tough" stance with the *Bully*, we can provide opportunities for responsibility and praise friendly and fair behavior when it occurs. We can assist this student in making friends by assigning small-group work with students who are congenial but not submissive.

Next comes the rigid and critical *Nitpicker*. But look again. We might see a careful, thorough person with abilities of analysis and organization. Let us not discourage this student's enthusiasm or efforts but, rather, show appreciation for his/her contributions. We can also give praise for showing perspective when the student recognizes the validity of an opposing opinion. These methods could help him/her to become a facilitator in our classroom discussions rather than an obstructor.

Last comes the *Doormat*, compliant and submissive, ever ready to follow. If we look at the "flip-side" of this behavior, we can see this student as being tolerant and cooperative. He/she is always helping supporting someone else's idea of project.

This student needs ample reassurance and attention. We can assign classroom duties that will create feelings of importance. We need to encourage his/her initiative and reinforce even small accomplishments to help build a feeling of self-worth and confidence.

We have now taken the limitations or negative aspects of behavior of these four types of students and "flipped" them into strengths or positive characteristics. Looking at the class again, we now see four favorable categories of students. There are those who are fun-loving and witty, those who are leaders, some who are analyzers and organizers, and others who are tolerant and cooperative.

Using this approach of "accenting the positive" will enable us to take a second look at troublesome students, to see their behavior in a more favorable way, and to communicate this favorable picture to the students themselves. This "flip-side" technique will assist in building and maintaining the positive self-concepts so important to students' development in all areas of learning and behavior.