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How Can Parents Foster Self-Esteem in Their Children?

SchwabLearning.org asks:

If parents of children with learning problems give up their negative scripts, what can they do to be more effective in nurturing self-esteem, competence, and resilience?

Dr. Robert Brooks Answers:

In answering your question, I would like to summarize the main points made in my other articles.

- Children with learning and attention difficulties often struggle with feelings of low self-esteem and a loss of hope for future success.
- They rely on counterproductive, or self-defeating, coping behaviors to deal with these feelings of failure, hopelessness, and humiliation.
- It is the responsibility of the adults in the lives of children to alter their own ineffective behaviors if these children are to change their behaviors.
- Every youngster has "islands of competence", or areas of strength, upon which we can build.
- Adults must identify and reinforce these islands so a sense of hope and optimism may replace feelings of despair.

Interventions to Nurture Self-Esteem and Resilience in the Home

Attribution theory offers guideposts for bolstering self-esteem and hope. It directs us to seek ways for youngsters with learning problems to feel an increasing sense of ownership, control, and responsibility for their successes and to view mistakes as experiences from which to learn rather than feel defeated. What follows are several key strategies with examples of how parents might accomplish this task. Each family should use these strategies in a way that is in accord with the family's values and best meets the particular needs of each child.

1. Understanding and Accepting Our Children's Learning Problems and De-Mystifying These Problems for Them

A first step in helping children with learning difficulties is for parents to appreciate the nature of these problems, to truly learn to accept children for who they are and not what we had hoped they would be, and to help children understand their unique learning strengths and weaknesses. Many parents have told me that before they became parents the notion of "accepting children for who they are" seemed an easy task, but they discovered it was far more difficult to achieve once their children arrived. Whether we realize it or not, parents have images of who their children will be even before these children are born; children rarely live up to these images, so disappointment is likely to emerge.

A failure to understand the nature of our children's learning styles and learning struggles may lead well-meaning parents to have unrealistic expectations and to say and do things that actually contribute to a lowering of self-esteem and motivation. I once worked with parents who described their 9-year-old son as "irresponsible, unmotivated, and manipulative." They were frustrated by his

