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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

failure to do his homework and follow through on chores in the house. They fell into a negative script of resorting to punishment, believing "he could do it if he wanted to." Their frustration was evident in their first meeting with me when they said, "We have encouraged him to try harder, we have taken away many privileges like watching TV and playing video games, we stand over him to do his work, but the problem seems to be getting worse and our relationship with him is terrible."

As I reviewed his developmental and school history, I strongly recommended an assessment of his learning strengths and weaknesses. Interestingly, the results clearly indicated learning problems that had not been identified previously, especially in his language and organizational skills. With this knowledge, the mindset of the parents changed as they worked closely with the school to develop more realistic expectations for their son and to implement support services.

As a result of changes in the mindset of the parents and teachers, which were reflected in a more compassionate, encouraging approach, this boy's negative attitude lessened noticeably and he became an integral member of the "treatment team." **Facilitating this boy's change was the neuropsychologist who did the evaluation as he skillfully reviewed the test findings with the child. Strengths, or islands of competence, were highlighted.** Not only were problem areas described in language the boy could comprehend but, very importantly, so too were steps that could be taken to address these learning difficulties. After receiving this feedback, the boy shared with me that in the past he thought he was "very dumb and stupid and would never learn." The demystification of his problem and the articulation of treatment strategies helped him develop a more realistic sense of ownership, responsibility, and optimism for what occurred in his life.

2. Teaching Children How to Solve Problems and Make Decisions

A basic feature of high self-esteem and resilience is the belief that one has control over many areas of one's life and can accurately define these areas. This belief is tied to a feeling of ownership, which is a vital foundation for motivation. If we wish our children to develop this sense of control, it is imperative we provide them with opportunities from an early age to learn and apply problem-solving and decision-making skills. It is difficult to conceive of a child who lacks these skills to feel in control. Psychologist Myrna Shure, who developed the "I Can Problem Solve Program," advocates that parents avoid rushing in to solve a child's problems but rather engage the child in the process of thinking about two or three possible solutions, consider what solution might work best, and then attempt that solution.

I have used Dr. Shure's basic approach in my own work. However, I have also emphasized that, as an initial step, **we must gain an agreement with our children that**

- **what we perceive as a problem is something they also perceive as a problem** (I have learned that there is not always agreement between parents and children about what is or is not a problem); and
- **we consider a couple of back-up solutions should the first one prove ineffective** (I believe that to lessen feelings of failure, we must anticipate the possibility of a strategy not working.)

I have been impressed that children as young as four years of age can offer relatively sophisticated solutions to problems when given the opportunity. For instance, I once worked with a 7-year-old girl with learning problems who agreed that getting ready for school in the morning, meeting responsibilities at home (e.g., putting toys away), and completing her homework were difficult for her. If her parents reminded her to complete these tasks, she became angry and accused them of nagging her. I asked her what she would suggest and was pleasantly surprised to hear her

proposed solutions: getting a clock radio with two alarms so that if the first did not get her up, the second would, making a list of her responsibilities that was posted on the refrigerator and in her room, and being allowed to “rest” for an hour after school rather than beginning her homework immediately (the homework still had to be completed before dinner). We discussed these proposed ideas with her parents and built in safety nets and consequences: if she forgot to do something, her parents could simply say, “Check the list” and if she did not complete her homework before dinner, the following day she would be required to begin her homework earlier. A key component in this process was her involvement in considering different solutions.

3. Reinforcing Responsibility by Having Children Contribute

Self-esteem and resilience are nurtured when children are asked to contribute to their world and to the well-being of others. In my research and clinical work, I have found that one of the most effective ways of boosting self-worth and motivation is to communicate to our children, “You have something of value to offer; your presence makes a positive difference in the lives of others.”

The basic message from parents to their children should be “We need your help.” The specific activities can include having certain household responsibilities or involving our children in helping us at a soup kitchen or delivering food for the elderly or going for a walk for one’s favorite charity. These “contributory activities” serve to strengthen a child’s self-worth and dignity and provide the encouragement and motivation to attempt tasks that have proved problematic in the past. We must remember that success begets future success.

Our children’s islands of competence can guide us in the tasks we offer them to help others.

One teenage girl with learning problems loved interacting with younger children. Her parents affectionately referred to her as the “Pied Piper of the block.” Her sense of responsibility increased greatly when she was asked to watch two neighborhood siblings one afternoon a week. A 10-year-old boy with school difficulties volunteered one afternoon a week at a local nursing home, playing chess or checkers with the residents. This activity nurtured his confidence.

4. Learning from, Rather than Feeling Defeated by, Mistakes

All children are concerned about making mistakes and looking foolish. However, youngsters with learning problems typically experience more failure situations than their peers who do not have these problems and, thus, are even more vulnerable and fearful about failing. Attribution theory indicates children with high self-esteem view mistakes as experiences from which to learn, while their counterparts with low self-esteem perceive mistakes as things they cannot change, often prompting them to avoid or retreat from tasks. If we are to raise resilient children, it is essential to help them develop a more positive attitude towards mistakes.

How best to do this? In part, we can be guided by two questions that I often ask in my parenting workshops and in my clinical work. They are:

- “What do your children observe when you make a mistake?”
- “What do you do when your children make mistakes?”

In terms of the first question, we serve as models for our children. It is for this reason I often ask *children to describe how their parents act when they (the parents) make mistakes.* Children who grow up in homes in which parents model effective ways of coping with mistakes will respond, “They joke about it,” “They say it’s not a big deal,” “They wonder what they can do differently next time.” Unfortunately, I have also heard the following, “They scream,” “They curse,” “They quit.” One of the most memorable responses came from a boy who asked me, “What’s a double martini?” Obviously,

his parents were not modeling an effective way of dealing with frustration.

Shifting to the second question, parents must examine how they respond to their children's mistakes. Out of frustration, some parents have said to their kids with learning problems, "I told you it wouldn't work!" or "You don't try hard enough!" or "Why don't you use your brains!" **When children make mistakes, they need our support, and we should use a problem-solving approach.** They should hear us say, "That's okay. Let's figure out how we can succeed next time." We should also prepare our children for the possibility of mistakes by saying in advance, "If this doesn't work, there are other things we can attempt."

Remember, one of the most important things we can do to promote high self-esteem and resilience in our children is to help them deal comfortably with obstacles, mistakes, and setbacks.

5. Special Needs or Feeling Special

Self-esteem and hope are nurtured when we convey appreciation and unconditional love to our children. Although political and funding issues prohibit us from abandoning the term "special needs," I have frequently entertained the idea of replacing the words with a sign in front of every home and school that reads, "Every child who enters these doors needs to feel special." **To use Julius Segal's description, we must strive to be the "charismatic adult" in our children's lives, an adult from whom they "gather strength."**

Children will feel loved when we create special times alone with them each day or week. I recommend that parents of young children say to them, "When I read or play with you, it's such a special time that even if the phone rings, I won't answer it." **Designating these special times is especially important for youngsters with learning and attention problems who often feel they have let themselves and others down.** One boy with learning difficulties told me what a "disappointment" he was to his parents. Thus, with these youngsters, we must be even more sensitive to their need to feel our unconditional love.

I often think about a 5-year-old boy with attention problems who believed correctly that his father was disappointed and angry with him. I empathized with this father's frustration, and we discussed ways in which to help his son begin to feel special in his father's eyes. This father scheduled a "private time" once a week, which involved going to a local donut shop for breakfast before school. The boy proudly told me about this "private time" with his dad, a time that served as a catalyst for improving their relationship and helping the child feel loved and accepted—cornerstones of self-esteem.

In my next article, I will describe interventions schools can adopt to complement the actions of parents in fostering self-esteem, hope, and resilience in students with learning problems.

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*Children.***Other Resources****Books**

Educational Care

<http://main.wgbh.org/wgbh/shop/products/wg2178.html>

By Dr. Mel Levine

All Kinds of Minds

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0838820905/schwabfoundation/

By Mel Levine

Keeping a Head in School

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0838820697/schwabfoundation/

By Mel Levine

Raising Resilient Children

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0809297655/schwabfoundation

By Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein

Raising a Thinking Preteen

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0805059911/schwabfoundation/>

By Myrna B. Shure

Raising a Thinking Child

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0671534637/schwabfoundation/>

By Myrna B. Shure

Jarvis Clutch — Social Spy

<http://www.allkindsofminds.org/Excerpt.aspx?productid=10!!|viewmode=excerpt>

By Mel Levine, M.D.

Websites

Dr. Robert Brooks' site

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>

The National Council of Teachers of English

An Alphabet for Parents

<http://www.ncte.org/parents/tips/111033.htm>

[Video]

[Look What You've Done! Stories of Hope and Resilience for Teachers and for Parents](#)

By Dr. Robert Brooks