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How Can Teachers Foster Self-Esteem in Children?

SchwabLearning.org asks:

What can teachers do to foster motivation, self-esteem, and resilience in students with learning problems?

Dr. Robert Brooks Answers:

The answer parallels many of the same strategies I described for parents to bolster a child's sense of self-esteem, optimism, and resilience. Research about resilience highlights the significant influence of even one adult to help children with learning and attention problems become increasingly hopeful and successful. The late Julius Segal called that one person a "charismatic adult," noting this was an adult with whom children "identify and from whom they gather strength." Segal observed, "And in a surprising number of cases that person turns out to be a teacher." Not surprisingly, teachers and schools play a major role in determining a child's sense of self-worth and dignity.

The Mindset of Teachers Who Are Charismatic Adults

How can teachers serve as charismatic adults? Certainly they must use particular interventions to bolster the self-esteem and resilience of students. However, if strategies are to be effective, the teachers using them must possess a positive mindset, or set of assumptions, about themselves and their students. Some of the main features of this mindset are:

1. Every student desires to learn and be successful in school. If they are not, we must strive to understand the nature of their learning problems.

2. If students are demonstrating self-defeating behaviors, such as quitting, or not trying, or acting like the class clown or class bully, we must recognize these are ineffective coping strategies that often mask feelings of vulnerability, low self-esteem, and hopelessness. Rather than impose punitive consequences, we must ask how to minimize the despair these youngsters experience each and every day.

3. If we are to lessen the use of these ineffective coping behaviors, we must teach these youngsters in ways they can learn best. This implies that as educators we must first change our approach and teaching style if students with learning problems are to adopt a more hopeful, positive approach. We must be comfortable in making accommodations when needed.

4. Each child or adolescent possesses "islands of competence," or areas of strength, that must be identified, reinforced, and displayed by educators. A strength-based model does not deny the child's problems but recognizes the importance of using the child's strengths as an important component of any intervention program.

5. We must actively invite and involve students in the process of their own education.

Interventions to Nurture Self-Esteem and Resilience in the School Environment

If one accepts the tenets of this mindset, then it is easier for educators to rely upon attribution theory for offering guideposts for bolstering self-esteem and hope. This theory directs us to find 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 teachers might accomplish this task. Each educator should use these strategies in a way that most successfully meets the particular needs of each student.

1. **Understanding Our Students' Learning Problems and De-Mystifying These Problems for Them**

   A first step in helping children with learning difficulties is for teachers and parents to

appreciate the nature of these problems, help children understand their unique learning strengths and weaknesses, and make appropriate accommodations in their school programs. When I conduct psychological/educational evaluations, I seek to enlist the children, as well as their parents and teachers, as active "partners" in the evaluation. I ask these youngsters what they see as their learning strengths and weaknesses. I am often very impressed with their ability to articulate their learning profile. I describe the evaluation as an attempt to understand more clearly their strengths and weaknesses so together we can figure out the best ways for them to learn.

When I complete an evaluation, I sit down with the youngster to review my findings, emphasizing both his islands of competence and his areas of difficulty and what we might do to strengthen the latter. Typically, I write a special report for each child, thanking him for working with me and detailing, in language he can understand, the main findings of the evaluation and the interventions I believe would help him. I should note that the interventions follow from the discussions I have with parents and teachers.

My close friend Dr. Mel Levine, through his writings and lectures, has skillfully demonstrated the importance of de-mystifying for children their learning strengths and problems. The more articulate students are about their learning style, the better equipped they will be to become self-advocates for what they need to succeed in the school environment.

2. **Making Appropriate Accommodations to Maximize the Success of Children with Learning Problems in School**

If all children learn differently, then it makes inherent sense that we teach them in ways they learn best. The kinds of accommodations I typically recommend do not require major modifications in a student's program, nor do they demand that a teacher have different educational plans for each student in the classroom. What is required is that all parties — students, teachers, parents — understand a child's strengths and weaknesses, arrive at common expectations and goals, and recognize what has to be done to reach these goals.

Some teachers have raised the question whether it is "fair" to make accommodations for one student, especially if other students feel offended. While I understand this concern, I believe that since all children are different and learn differently, the least fair thing is to treat all of them the same. However, the issue of fairness must be openly addressed lest other students begin to resent those students who are receiving accommodations. For this reason, I advocate that schools use the first couple of days of the new school year (although it is never too late) as an "orientation" period. During this period, teachers would not focus on academic content but instead would use the time to create a classroom climate in which all students would have the opportunity to thrive.

For example, to lessen the possibility of children feeling a teacher is unfair because some children might be doing more work than others, on the first day of school, the teacher can discuss with the class how each student is different, how some students read more quickly than others, how some can solve math problems more proficiently, how some can run faster than others. The teacher can then say that given these differences, there will be different goals and expectations of the amount and kind of work done by each student. The teacher can add, "One of my concerns is that you may begin to feel I am not being fair, and if you do, those feelings may interfere with learning. Thus, if at any time you feel I am not being fair, please tell me so we can discuss it."

The feedback I have received indicates that when a teacher introduces the topic of "fairness" **before** it becomes an issue, it remains a non-issue and permits the teacher to accommodate to each student's needs without negative feelings emerging. Obviously, teachers should share this message of fairness with parents, perhaps through a short statement of class philosophy that is sent home.

As noted, the kinds of modifications I typically have recommended do not require major changes. A teacher reviewing several of these recommendations recently remarked, "These are all very reasonable." The following are a small selection of these accommodations:

- Untimed tests should be provided. I have known students with learning problems whose scores have gone up significantly by taking tests untimed, and yet they only required a few extra minutes. Removing the pressure of time lessened their anxiety.
- A maximum time for homework can be defined. I believe that if most members of a

class can do six math problems in 15 minutes, then, if possible, teachers should set that as a maximum time. If some students can do only three problems in that time span, the three should be accepted. To ask students with learning and attention problems to put in an inordinate amount of time for homework not only is counterproductive in terms of learning, but also increases tension at home.

- We should ensure students know what the homework assignments are. Many students with learning problems have difficulty copying homework assignments from the blackboard. Providing the child with a monthly "syllabus" of assignments can be very helpful. Some teachers assign a "buddy" to ensure the child has an accurate picture of the homework required.

- Children should be permitted to use computers for their assignments. Many students who have difficulty transmitting their ideas on paper do much better with computers. Yet, I know of teachers who still feel "students have to learn to write." By this they mean, writing with a pen or pencil. My feeling is if students struggle to write with a pen or pencil but find it easier to express their thoughts using a computer, they should be allowed to do so.

3. **Teaching Children How to Solve Problems and Make Decisions**

I continually emphasize that a basic feature of high self-esteem and resilience is the belief 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, a vital foundation for motivation. If we wish our children to develop this sense of control, it is essential we provide them with opportunities from an early age to learn and apply problem-solving and decision-making skills.

When I consult with schools and have the opportunity to interview students, I often ask, "What choices or decisions have you made in the past month in school?" Choices and decisions must be present if we are to help students with learning problems gain a feeling of ownership and become self-advocates.

Teachers can provide choices in many ways. A couple of examples include:

- Teachers in one school gave a certain number of problems for homework but said to the students, "It's your choice. Look at all six problems, and then do the four you think will help you learn best." By offering the students the choice to "do less," they actually received more homework than in the past, especially since the students felt a greater sense of ownership.

- When children are having difficulty learning, it is advantageous to discuss with them what they think might be most helpful and to attempt certain strategies. As Dr. Myrna Shure has found using her "I Can Problem-Solve" program, even young children are capable of coming up with different options to help them learn more effectively.

4. **Reinforcing Responsibility by Having Children Contribute**

Self-esteem and resilience are nurtured when children are provided opportunities to contribute to their world and to the well-being of others. In my research, I found that when adults are asked, "What is one of your most positive memories of school when you were a student, a memory involving something an adult said or did that boosted your self-esteem and motivation?" the most frequent answer centered around being asked to help.

For this reason when I consult with educators, I request they make a list of their students and what each contributes to the school environment. I have found that when students feel they are making a positive difference in school, they are more motivated to do well and are more willing to take appropriate risks in learning. These acts of caring can easily be linked with academic tasks. There should not be one student in a school who does not feel he is contributing to a better school environment. A few examples follow:

- Students with learning problems can be asked to read to younger children.

- An educator I knew enlisted adolescents with learning problems to sponsor a bake sale and raffle, with the proceeds going to a needy family in the community. This educator noted the students'self-esteem improved as they performed the many academic skills involved in the charitable project.

- Students can take care of plants in school, or paint murals on the wall, or hang up favorite drawings.
- Some schools use cooperative learning groups so students gain experience working together and helping each other. For some youngsters with learning problems, it is the first time they realize they have something to contribute to the school.

5. **Learning from, Rather than Feeling Defeated by, Mistakes**

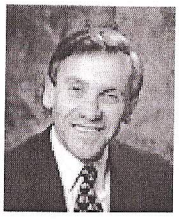
All students are concerned about making mistakes and looking foolish. However, youngsters with learning problems typically experience more failure situations than peers who do not have these problems. Thus, they are even more vulnerable and fearful about failing. They feel especially "exposed" in school since it is an environment in which their learning problems are very evident. If we are to keep students from losing hope and quitting, we must help them develop a more positive attitude towards mistakes.

One of the most effective means of dealing with the fear of making mistakes and failing is to discuss this fear directly with students even before any mistakes are made. This is best done during the "orientation" period mentioned earlier. One of my favorite techniques for accomplishing this task is for teachers to ask at the beginning of the school year, "Who feels they are going to make a mistake and not understand something in class this year?" Before any of the students can respond, teachers can raise their own hands and discuss times when they were students and worried about making mistakes and how this interfered with their learning. They can then engage the class in a problem-solving discussion of what they can do as teachers and what the class can do to minimize the fear of failing and looking foolish. Rules can be established about how to call on students and how the teacher and other students should respond when a student does not know an answer.

Openly acknowledging the fear of failure renders it less potent and less destructive. Tying this to a discussion of how we all learn differently and have different strengths (islands of competence) and weaknesses sets the foundation for a class environment filled with respect and understanding. Such an environment is one in which students with learning problems will feel respected and their self-esteem, motivation, hope, and resilience will be nurtured.

Concluding Remarks

One of the most precious gifts we can provide children and adolescents with learning problems is to develop their self-dignity and resilience. I hope this series of articles has provided a helpful portrait of the world of these youngsters and what we can do to assist them to lead more satisfying, fulfilling, successful lives. A wonderful legacy we can leave these children and students is to be the charismatic adults in their lives, knowing they have truly "gathered strength" from us.



About the Contributors

Robert Brooks, Ph.D. is on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and has served as Director of the Department of Psychology at McLean Hospital. He has written many articles and book chapters; the book, *The Self-Esteem Teacher*; and co-authored *A Pediatric Approach to Learning Disorders* and *Raising Resilient 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

[Video]

Look What You've Done! Stories of Hope and Resilience for Teachers and for Parents
By Dr. Robert Brooks

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SchwabLearning.org

Close

20 Tips to Promote Positive Self-Esteem

1. Value each child as an individual with unique strengths, needs, interests, and skills.
2. Focus on the child's strengths. Emphasize and celebrate his "islands of competence."
3. Reject the child's behavior, but never reject the child. Use affectionate terms and nicknames when scolding ("Your room is a mess, honey. Now turn off the TV and make your bed.").
4. Remember that sincere interest can be more effective and meaningful than praise. Demonstrate a genuine interest in her activities, hobbies, etc.
5. Establish realistic, achievable goals for your child. Anticipate success.
6. Avoid using sarcasm with kids; children with language problems often misinterpret it.
7. When discussing an issue or a problem, avoid bringing up past difficulties.
8. Never compare one child to another.
9. Help the child develop decision-making and problem-solving skills.
10. Understand that mistakes are an inevitable (and valuable) part of any learning experience. Use mistakes as an opportunity to teach and assist.
11. Divide large tasks into smaller, manageable ones. This will ensure success, mastery, and retention.
12. Maintain a file of his academic work. Use this to demonstrate his progress and development when he is feeling down.
13. Encourage him to maintain "collections" (e.g., baseball cards, stamps, rocks, etc.). This allows him to be the resident expert on a topic.
14. If she does not participate in team sports, promote individual sports (e.g., skiing, golf, swimming). This will provide opportunities for success, exercise, and peer interaction.
15. Communicate your confidence in the child **and** in her future.
16. Permit and encourage the child to follow the normal fads of his peer group (e.g., clothing, music). This will enhance his acceptance at school and in the community.
17. Emphasize the positive aspects of her behavior or performance, even if the task was not completely successful. Reward direction, not perfection.
18. Anticipate that the child will have plateaus, failures, backslides, setbacks, and regressions. Support and encourage him at these times. Kids need love most when they deserve it least!
19. Look for opportunities to offer him choices to allow him to practice decision-making skills.
20. Never communicate disappointment to your child. The disappointment of an adult may be too great a burden for a child to carry.

Remember:

- Your child's self-esteem will be determined by the conditional acceptance that he receives from others — and the unconditional acceptance that he receives from you.
- Your child's self-esteem will be determined by success and progress in four areas:
  - Social (acceptance, friendships)
  - Competence (in a skill area)
  - Physical (clothing, attractiveness)
  - Character (effort, generosity, etc.)

Emphasize, recognize and reinforce all four areas!

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About the Contributors

Richard D. Lavoie, M.A., M.Ed. is a recognized authority on learning disabilities. He has spent more than thirty years working with kids who struggle to learn, as well as with their parents and teachers.

Other Resources

Books
The Self-Esteem Teacher
www.drrobertbrooks.com/products/index.html
By Dr. Robert Brooks

Keys to Developing Your Child's Self-Esteem
www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0764108476/schwabfoundation/
By Carl E. Pickhardt

Websites
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