

M16

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

