

NASET's HOW TO Series

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How To Identify Behaviors That May Indicate High or Low Self Esteem

Adapted from the book, *Creating Confident Children in the Classroom: The Use of Positive Restructuring*.

Pierangelo/Giuliani: Research Press

Introduction

Self esteem is feeling good about yourself. Because it is a feeling, self esteem is expressed in the way that people behave. However, success is important for the growth of positive feelings about oneself. High self esteem will allow your students to keep failure situations in proper perspective. Whether or not a failure situation is perceived as a learning experience, or as a self punishment, depends on one's level of self esteem.

Children as well as adults will vary in the type of self esteem exhibited. We all feel more confident on some days than others. Feeling low self esteem from time to time is not a problem. However, a pattern of low self esteem should be observed in order for there to be a concern. Teachers can easily observe children's self esteem by seeing what they do and how they accomplish it.

Understanding the Foundation of Self Esteem

A child with high self esteem will:

- feel capable of influencing other's opinions or behaviors in a positive way
- be able to communicate feelings and emotions in a variety of situations
- behave independently
- approach new situations in a positive manner
- exhibit a high level of frustration tolerance
- take on and assume responsibility
- keep situations in proper perspective
- communicate positive feelings about him/her
- be willing to try a new situation without major resistance

Such children will possess an internal locus of control. Consequently, they feel whatever happens to them is a direct result of their own behavior or actions. These children will therefore feel a sense of power over their environment.

Children with low self esteem will:

- communicate self derogatory statements
- exhibit a low frustration tolerance
- become easily defensive
- listen to other's judgment rather than his/her own
- be resistant to new situations and experiences
- constantly blame others for their failures and problems
- have very little feeling of power and control
- lose perspective easily - (blow things out of proportion)
- avoid any situation that creates tension
- be unwilling to reason

Such children will possess an external locus of control. Consequently, these children feel that what ever happens to them is the result of fate, luck or chance.

In order to fully understand self esteem, one must consider the factors involved. Self esteem occurs when children experience the positive feelings of satisfaction associated with feeling:

CONNECTED - A child feels good relating to people, places, and things that are important to her and these relationships are approved and respected by others.

UNIQUE - A child acknowledges and respects the personal characteristics that make him special and different, and receives approval and respect from others for those characteristics.

POWERFUL - A child uses the skills, resources, and opportunities that she has in order to influence the circumstances of her own life in important ways.

The following suggestions are offered to enhance children's positive feelings about themselves. These recommendations require consistency, genuineness and discrimination on the part of teachers and parents. No one suggestion by itself will have long lasting effects. A combination of techniques will have greater impact. However, you should always keep in mind that many other factors, not within your control i.e. peer group, school environmental factors, perception etc., will also contribute to children's self esteem. However, the role of teachers and parents are crucial and can offset a child's difficulties in other areas.

Be Solution Oriented

An important step in building your students' self esteem is to teach solutions rather than blame. Some children are very "blame oriented ". When something goes wrong, he/she is quick to "point the finger" at someone else. Children who are blame oriented not only become easily frustrated, but never learn how to handle obstacles. Teaching your studnets solutions begins with simple statements like, "Who's at fault is not important. The more important question is what we can do so that it doesn't happen again". Being solution oriented allows children a sense of control and resiliency when confronted with situations that could be ego deflating and lower their self esteem.

Allow Children the Right to Make Decisions

While the statement, "No one promised them a democracy" may hold true in some situations, allowing your students the right to make decisions that affects their daily life can only enhance their self esteem. Decisions about decorating lockers, seating arrangements, and free-time activities, etc. can make children feel some sense of control in what happens to them. Coupled with solution orientation, mistakes can be used as a positive learning experience. A good technique to use here is a forced choice technique. Provide the student with three options, all of

which are acceptable to you, and ask them to choose which one they prefer. The student will feel like they are making the decision but all of the choices will lead to resolution and success.

Offer Alternative Ways When Handling a Situation

Some people know only one or two alternatives in handling situations. After these fail, frustration occurs. Conditioning your students to see many alternative ways of handling a situation or obstacle can also enhance their self esteem. Asking children what they have tried and offering them options to other possible solutions, increases their "tool box". The more "tools" we have at our disposal, the easier life becomes. Individuals with limited "tools" tend to use avoidance and flight as a means of coping with frustration.

Teach Children the Proper Labels when Communicating Feelings

The ability to correctly label one's feelings is a factor in self esteem. Children have a very difficult time communicating because they lack the proper labels for their feelings. When children are unable to label an internal feeling, it becomes trapped and the frustration may become manifested in behavior problems, physical symptoms and so on. When such feelings are manifested in other forms, they are usually misunderstood or misinterpreted. Teachers can offer children the correct labels. For example, you may want to say, " While the feeling you are expressing sounds like anger, it is really frustration and frustration is... Now that you know this, is there anything that is causing you frustration? "

Building an emotional vocabulary allows communication to flow more easily and reduces a child's unwillingness to deal with situations.

Allow Children the Opportunity to Repeat Successful Experiences

Whenever possible, allow your students the chance to handle any job or responsibility in which they have proven success. A foundation of positive experiences is necessary for self esteem. Since the child has mastered skills required for the job, any opportunity to repeat success can only be ego inflating. Jobs such as collecting homework from other students, handing out materials, cleaning the room, are examples of repetitive experiences that will lead to a feeling of consistent success. However, in the cases of children with severe disabilities, the activities chosen will have to take into consideration the limitations so as not to frustrate them.

Allow Avenues for Disagreement

Children with higher self esteem will always feel they have an avenue to communicate their concerns. Even though the result may not go in their favor, the knowledge that a situation or disagreement can be discussed allows the child to feel some involvement in his destiny. This factor becomes important when one sees that many children with low self esteem feel a loss of power in affecting change.

Help Your Students Set Realistic Goals

This is a very crucial issue in helping children improve their self esteem. Some children will set unrealistic goals, fall short and feel like a failure. Repeated over a period of time, these unrealistic goals will result in consistent failure leading to more unrealistic goals. This circular behavior sometimes results with children becoming unwilling to venture out or take chances. The more limited children become in their experiences, the less chance for success. Avoidance, passivity, rejection of an idea or experience will only reinforce feelings of inadequacy.

Help your students by defining their objective. You may want to ask them what they want to accomplish. After this, try to help them define the steps necessary to accomplish the task and break down the task into smaller, controllable tasks that have the greatest chance of success. Each step becomes a goal in itself. Children should not see one final goal, but a series of smaller goals leading to a final point. In this way they will feel accomplishment at every step.

Use a Reward System to Shape Positive Behavior

Punishment tells a child what not to do, while rewards inform them of what to do. Rewarding positive behavior increases self esteem. Children enjoy winning the approval of teachers, parents and peers, especially when it comes to a job or task. You may want to use rewards such as notes indicating how proud you feel about what the child has accomplished. Rewards can also be special time where the student can choose from a list of fun activities, lunch with the teacher etc.

Make Sure you Communicate to Parents Not to Pave Children's Roads

Some parents make the mistake of reducing frustration for children to the point where the child receives a distorted view of the world. Children with high self esteem get frustrated. However, they tend to be more resilient because they have previously handled frustrating situations and worked out the solutions themselves. When parents rush to the aide of their children, finish assignments for them, or make excuses, they are changing the environment to prevent them from becoming frustrated. However, they are unwittingly reinforcing children's low self esteem and creating feelings of learned helplessness. After awhile, children become so dependent upon their parents to "bail them out" when they are confronted with frustration. The need to master the environment and find solutions to challenges is crucial to positive self esteem. The old saying, "Catch me a fish and I'll eat today, teach me to fish and I'll eat forever", seems to apply.

In conclusion, improving your students' self esteem is a process that needs to be viewed in a positive way. Altering feelings of low self esteem offers children a more positive future.