

# Building Self-Esteem in Children with ADHD

## Introduction

One of the greatest gifts you can give any child is the gift of self-esteem. In simplest terms, self esteem is the opinion we have of ourselves. When we feel good about who we are and what we can do, it promotes a sense of esteem in our abilities that we can take on any of life's challenges. Self-esteem starts very early in life, and parents play a critical role in fostering self-esteem in their children.

Unfortunately, many children with ADHD face very tough roads when it comes to their self-esteem. The reality is that they experience greater challenges than those without ADHD. For those students with learning ADHD, it's difficult to have academic self-esteem when they have difficulty processing information and may be unable to accomplish what their peers are doing. Similarly, children with often feel left out and question their abilities.

Given the issues surrounding the self-esteem of children with ADHD, what can parents do to promote it in their children?

## BE SOLUTION ORIENTED

An important step in building self-esteem in children with ADHD is to teach solutions rather than blame. Teaching children solutions to problems or frustrating situations begins with 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" or, "What do we need to do to make it work or fix the problem?" 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, giving your children the chance to make decisions that affects their daily life can only enhance their self esteem. Decisions about clothing, room arrangement, and friends to invite to a party, menu for dinner etc. can give children a sense of control over what happens to them.

## OFFER ALTERNATE WAYS OF HANDLING A SITUATION

Some children know only one way to handle situations. After it fails, frustration occurs. Conditioning children with ADHD to see alternate ways of managing a situation or obstacle can enhance a sense of power and self-esteem. Asking them what they have tried and offering other options to possible solutions increase their "tool box" of skills.

## **TEACH PROPER LABELS WHEN COMMUNICATING FEELINGS**

When children with ADHD are unable to label an internal feeling, they often become frustrated. When such feelings go unlabeled, they may become manifested in negative behavior, often reducing self-esteem. Parents can offer children the correct labels, e.g., "While the feeling you are expressing sounds like anger, it is really frustration. Frustration is.....Now that you know this, is there anything that is causing you frustration?"

## **ALLOW FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO REPEAT SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCES**

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 an ego inflating experience.

## **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 SET REALISTIC GOALS**

Some children with ADHD will set unrealistic goals, fall short and in turn, feel like a failure. Repeated over a period of time, these children may begin to develop a sense of urgency for success and this in turn may lead to more unrealistic goals. This circular behavior sometimes results with children becoming unwilling to venture out or take chances. Parents can help children by assisting them in defining their objectives and determining the necessary steps necessary to accomplish the goal. Children should not see one final goal, but a series of smaller goals leading to a final point.

## **USE A REWARD SYSTEM TO SHAPE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR**

Punishment tells a child what not to do, while reward informs a child of what is acceptable behavior. Rewarding positive behavior increases self-esteem. Rewards can be in the form of special trips, extra time before bed, special dinners with one parent, a hug, kiss or a note in a lunchbox.

## **DON'T PAVE EVERY ROAD**

Parents often make the mistake of reducing frustration for children to the point where they receive a distorted view of the world. Children with high self-esteem get frustrated just like those with low self-esteem. However, they tend to be more resilient, since they have previous success in handling frustrating situations themselves. Teaching children with ADHD alternate solutions, proper labels for their feelings, to set realistic goals, solution orientation and techniques to verbalize their disagreements are more productive than "bailing 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.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, esteem is nothing magical or difficult to understand. Without successful experiences on which to draw, children will not believe that they are capable of performing well. Telling children with ADHD they are bright, special, unique, and capable and so on, without their having actual experiences to validate the words, really has no meaning. If I strike out every time I go to bat but you tell me “you’re as good baseball player”, it has little impact because I know that I am not. Children only build upon that which they can see, which in turn affects that which they can feel. It is our responsibility as parents to do whatever we can to foster successful experiences for our children to promote their overall self-esteem.