

Maintaining a Positive and Healthy Self-Esteem: What Can Adults Do?

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Lesson Goals:

Family involvement in promoting healthy self-esteem in Nebraska's children.

Objectives:

- Help Nebraska parents and caregivers identify ways to promote healthy self-esteem in children.
- Raise awareness about how others can affect children's self-esteem.

Leader Resources:

Cooking with Your Kids — Georgia Jones
Fit and Healthy Kids: What Can Parents Do? University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension HE Form 533
How Television Viewing Affects Children—
www.umext.maine.edu/onlinepubs/htmpubs/4100.htm
Tuft's University Child and Family Web Guide—
www.cfw.tufts.edu/topic/4/81.htm

Before the Meeting:

Read the Leader's Guide and the two handouts. Assemble writing material for the participants as they will be asked to generate some lists. As the leader, take or have available some means of capturing thoughts generated by the participants, such as a flip chart, blackboard or notepaper (optional).

At the Meeting:

Distribute the Participant Manual handout. Have participants generate different lists and engage in discussion of those lists (instructions in Teaching Plan on the next page). Give participants the handout, "Positive Adjectives for Promoting Healthy Self-Esteem."

Introduction:

The message given in Ysaye Barnwell's book, *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* (1998¹), is that adults can be central in creating the world that young people experience. Young people learn much about themselves and their world from adults. Adults have the ability to significantly impact a young person's opinion of him or herself. If we imagine, *or remember*, that we are the "mirror" that our young people look into for feedback, we can provide young people with comments and exhibit behavior that enhance their positive self-esteem.

Self-esteem is defined as a general feeling of self-worth. Individuals who like who they are and feel good about themselves are considered to have high self-esteem (HSE). People with low self-esteem (LSE) may dislike themselves or hold mixed feelings about themselves.

Throughout our lives we are exposed to countless messages from different people, both verbal and non-verbal, that can influence how we feel about ourselves or affect our self-esteem. Some messages come from parents, caregivers, and/or family friends starting at birth. For example, we all know which babies typically are dressed in blue and which ones usually wear pink. We also learn early which of us is considered beautiful, friendly and "good" by adults. As children grow up they are exposed to more, and sometimes different, messages from peers, friends, people at school and the media.

¹*No Mirrors in My Nana's House* tells the story of a young girl who is surrounded by poverty. Her understanding of the world as beautiful is reflected to her through her grandmother. Ysaye Barnwell is a member of Sweet Honey In the Rock singing group. A recording of *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* can be found on the group's CD "Still On The Journey" (1993).



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An ongoing criticism of our society is that too many messages encourage us to strive for what is labeled the “ideal” body. Girls, and more recently boys, are being bombarded with products, strategies and suggestions for manipulating their bodies to attain a certain body shape. These messages may contain conflicting information about what is realistically achievable and what is attainable only through surgical procedures, illegal supplements or artful touching-up of photographs. Young people’s feelings of self-worth could be sabotaged if they are unable to tease apart reality from idealism.

Overview of Workshop:

Workshop activities will stimulate adults to think about how they interact with young people and how that behavior affects young people’s self-esteem. Activities will focus on helping adults respond to pressures that young people may experience about their appearance that lead to low self-esteem. Workshop attendees also will be asked to examine their personal values and practices related to body-image issues and to think about how their behavior could be observed and mimicked by young people.

Teaching Plan:

1. Ask participants to generate a list of people or entities that might influence a child’s thoughts about himself or herself. Some examples are: ads in the media (TV, magazines, Internet) that are both visual and written; and comments and observations from peers, family, friends, teachers, coaches.
2. Ask participants to generate a list of comments or messages these individuals or entities might make to children. For example, ads in the media might suggest that individuals should have fresh breath, white teeth and long hair.
3. Ask participants to divide the list of messages or the terms into three categories — positive, negative and neutral.
4. Ask participants to discuss why they think certain messages or terms are negative. Some questions that can be posed to the participants are:
 - Could the messages lead to obsession with one’s body image and promote eating disorders?
 - Could the messages encourage sexual harassment at school or within one’s peer group?
 - Could the messages encourage aggressive and/or insensitive treatment of girls by boys or vice versa?
5. Ask participants to expand the list of positive terms that can be used to describe children. How many of the terms are related to the child’s appearance? Ask participants to cross out terms that refer to appearance.
6. Ask participants to generate a list of words that can be used to give positive feedback without referring to the child’s appearance. Terms can focus on children’s skills, attitudes or attributes (see list of adjectives).
7. Ask participants to identify ways that a family can address negative messages that could affect a child’s self-esteem. Some suggestions are:
 - Engage in family activities that do not include the media (e.g., play board games, participate in outdoor sports, attend cultural events).
 - Prepare and eat meals together.
 - Discuss and critique messages in the media (e.g., TV, magazines, movies, Internet) focused on appearance. Evaluate if the messages encourage people to embrace their unique beauty or attempt to make people feel guilty or ashamed about their appearance. Are the photos of “ideal” people altered or enhanced?
8. Ask participants to reflect on their personal attitudes and behaviors relative to diets, attitudes about “ideal” body images, and other media messages.

Final Thoughts:

The message given in Barnwell’s book, *No Mirrors in My Nana’s House*, is that adults can be central in creating the world that young people experience. Imagine you are the “mirror” that you want your child to look into for feedback. What do you want your child to see in that mirror? As responsible adults, we can promote children’s healthy self-esteem by encouraging them to develop their talents, improve their skills and become good citizens. We can give children positive feedback that encourages them to embrace and celebrate their entire and unique selves.

Reviewers: Georgia Jones and Diane Vigna, University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

²Adapted from Statham, A. & Rhoades, K. (2001). Gender and self-esteem. In T. Owens, S. Stryker & N. Goodman (Eds.), *Extending self-esteem theory and research: Sociological and psychological currents* (pp. 255 - 284). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.