

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

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Developing Healthy Self-Esteem

Young people learn early about themselves and their world from parents and caregivers. The number of people that young people interact with and the variety and amount of information they receive from others increases as children mature. These messages that young people are constantly exposed to can be either verbal or nonverbal. For example, a frown on a face (nonverbal) typically is read as disapproval or disagreement; whereas, a smile usually means agreement or approval.

As young people mature, they develop a filtering system that allows them to identify messages, comments or actions that they will give focused attention to. Young people pay attention to messages or comments from individuals who are important or significant in their lives. As young people mature, the group of significant people in their lives expands from parents, family and caregivers to include peers, friends, people at school, community members and the media. As responsible adults, we can foster positive self-esteem by encouraging our young people to develop their talents, improve their skills and become good citizens.

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 come from the media, individuals outside the young person’s home, and sometimes unknowingly from parents and caregivers.

The 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. For example, photos of models in fashion magazines typically are enhanced. Technological advancements make it possible to change every aspect of our bodies — eye color, whiter teeth, body shape reconfiguration, and even to render a photo using a composite of several different bodies. We can help our youth become more critical of messages from the media and from individuals that suggest they should strive for unrealistic goals.

In the next section, day-to-day activities are identified that parents and caregivers can use to provide positive feedback that will help young people embrace and celebrate their entire and unique selves.

Strategies for Fostering Healthy Self-Esteem

- Instead of focusing on young people’s appearances, provide encouragement (both verbal and nonverbal) to help children develop their skills, talents and citizenship at home and in the community.
- Watch TV or videos with young people and help them identify inappropriate behavior.
- Look at magazines with children and explain how photos are retouched.
- Engage in activities that focus on young people’s mental abilities (e.g., board games).
- Engage in activities that promote physical health (e.g., walking, bicycle riding).



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- Monitor messages that young people receive from others (adults and children) about their appearance. Help children examine the messages and determine if the messages enhance children's positive self-esteem and encourage a healthy body.
- Monitor your personal behavior and attitudes about dieting. Young people learn a great deal by observing and then mimicking behavior.

Final Thoughts

The message given in Ysaye Barnwell's book, *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* (1998)¹, 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?

The list "Positive Adjectives for Promoting Healthy Self-Esteem" contains words that describe attitudes, talents, skills, and behaviors. These words can be used to provide constructive feedback to young people that will help them embrace and celebrate their entire and unique selves.

Resources

Barnwell, Ysaye (1998) *No Mirrors in My Nana's House*. Harcourt Brace & Co.

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/htmlpubs/4100.htm

Tuft's University Child and Family Web Guide — www.cfw.tufts.edu/topic/4/81.htm

¹Ysaye 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).

Positive Adjectives for Promoting Healthy Self-Esteem

Accomplished	Analytical	Articulate	Brave
Caring	Cheerful	Clever	Compassionate
Conscientious	Considerate	Correct	Courageous
Creative	Curious	Daring	Dependable
Determined	Disciplined	Eager	Efficient
Energetic	Enthusiastic	Expert	Expressive
Fair	Flexible	Focused	Gentle
Happy	Helpful	Heroic	Honest
Independent	Inquisitive	Innocent	Innovative
Intelligent	Jovial	Kind	Knowledgeable
Leader	Logical	Loving	Loyal
Motivated	Observant	Open	Organized
Passionate	Peaceful	Persistent	Positive
Proficient	Purposeful	Reasonable	Resilient
Resourceful	Respectful	Responsible	Savvy
Skillful	Smart	Spirited	Spontaneous
Supportive	Talented	Tenacious	Thoughtful
Trusting	Trustworthy	Truthful	Witty