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# What is self-esteem

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# What Is Self-Esteem

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## Introduction

Self-esteem is generally defined as 'good opinion of one's own character and abilities'. This refers to a positive characteristic about thinking that someone or something is important or valuing that person or thing. Sheslow breaks the two words, self and esteem further. By "self" he means how much value a person has of him/herself and, "esteem" he refers to how a person thinks about the importance he or she has of his/her own abilities. In other words, it may be a favorable opinion, a regard or a way to see oneself and how a particular individual feels about his/her own achievements. This may be influenced by one's nature, special qualities, personality, contextual realities, opportunities and challenges in a real life situation.

Self-esteem is greatly determined and influenced by development and growth. Each child has an individual pattern and timing of growth and development as well as an individual style of learning. Children begin to recognize themselves as early as eighteen months, in fact as soon as they see their face in the mirror; they begin to identify who they are, what they look like, being egocentric they also recognize their Identity; that the whole world at home/school revolves around them. Hence, self-recognition lets young children think about their self-understanding and develop their self-recognition. They know that they are different physically but yet learn very early in life that others may have similar characteristics and abilities to themselves. For example, everyone has two eyes and hands.

**Young children's self-esteem is based largely on their perceptions of how important adults value their characteristics and judge them.**

Children usually become stubborn during the second and third year due to increasing self-awareness. During the following years, they become less egocentric and learn to play with other children. It is during this time that they learn to recognize that others also have needs such as theirs and others' matter too besides themselves. Three to five year old children usually talk about their physical appearance, hobbies and possessions. Personal family experiences and cultural backgrounds help a child in understanding his or her own social Identity. Young children develop different self-help and coping strategies, to become self-sufficient at dressing, feeding and shoe tying. They also learn to manage coping with difficult situations that arise in the classroom such as avoiding fights and winning friends. At five years, children acquire self-help skills and are ready to go to school. For acquiring these skills they need a longer attention span, memory for a complex series of hand movements and the skillfulness to perform them. They also begin to develop a morality. They learn values of honesty, truth, integrity, morals and a few ethical principles such as genuine, righteous ways and fair means for play or games. Therefore, when parents and teachers of young children talk about the need for good self-esteem, they usually mean that children should have "good feelings" about themselves. With young children, self-esteem refers to the extent to which they expect



to be accepted and valued by adults and peers who are important to them.

Our own experiences of working with children have proven that children with a healthy sense of self-esteem are those who are accepted, and cared for by their adults (teachers, parents, caregivers, grand-parents) whom they consider to be important. Their self-esteem further builds when they are assured that these adults have and would go out of their way to ensure their safety and well-being. They are aware that if anything happens to them (if they are hurt, sad, fearful or/and anxious), they would do anything to help them overcome these obstacles, rather than allow them to be upset and worried.

Children often tend to lose their self-esteem when friends, teachers and routines they are familiar with change. Often transition years from one school grade to another make the children disoriented. Hence, during this time their self-esteem is at the lowest ebb. Children with low self-esteem often feel that they are neglected; that important adults and peers in their lives do not accept them, or care enough about them, and would not ensure their safety and well-being.

Therefore, particularly during their early years, young

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children's self-esteem is based largely on their perceptions of how important adults value their characteristics and judge them. For example, in families and communities, children who excel in athletics are likely to have a high level of self-esteem, whereas children who are less athletic or who are criticized as being physically inept or clumsy are likely to suffer from low self-esteem. Families, communities, and cultural groups vary in the criteria on which self-esteem is based. For example, some groups may emphasize physical appearance (color, looks, physique), and some may evaluate boys and girls differently. Particularly, in a Pakistani context, in most cases boys are considered to be superior mentally and physically than girls. Learning abilities sometimes are clearly defined as what boys can learn and what girls can learn. Hence, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination are also some of the factors that may contribute to low self-esteem among children.

## Importance of Self-Esteem

Good self-esteem is important for both children and adults. Self-esteem helps one to hold his/her head high and feel proud of oneself and what an individual can achieve. It gives courage to try new things out and the

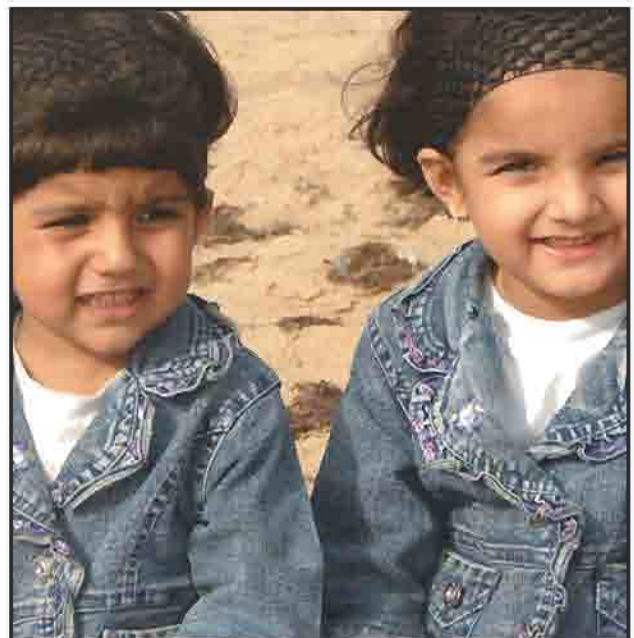
power to believe in oneself. It allows respecting oneself, even when an individual may make mistakes. When children learn to respect themselves, adults and other children usually respect them as well.

## Developmental Stages of Self-Esteem

Human beings seek respect, approval and admiration from other human beings in their lives. Positive self-esteem includes excitement, enthusiasm, interest and confidence. On the other hand, shame, guilt and doubt are associated with low self-esteem. Self-esteem does not develop but is accomplished through mastery of different skills. Children develop their self-esteem when they feel competent; through the establishment of human relationships; and with the feeling of belongingness to the meaningful cultural groups. Our experiences reflect that children with high self-esteem make friends easily and interact socially with others in meaningful ways. They seldom fear or feel threatened by others. It is often

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observed that children with a high self-esteem are better academic achievers, more sociable and generally care for and share with others. However, self-esteem of young





children is affected through the internalisation of a positive image about themselves and their limitations.

There are three developmental stages of self-esteem from birth through the school years. At first stage when a child is born, he or she is passive and just receives the innate behaviour of parents and they provide him the appropriate needs and necessities of life. During the first year of life, the relationship between the infant and the caretaker is of extreme importance. The parents need to be tuned to build self-esteem by understanding the child's needs. A parent's attitude must be changed according to the manner in which the baby reacts and to understand the immediate needs of the child. At the end of the first year, a child begins to differentiate him or herself as a separate individual.

At second stage the toddler begins to differentiate him or herself from the parents. Children, in each new accomplishment, look at their parents for approval. The self-esteem of these children grows as they imitate their parents and siblings' behaviours and develop their language, motor skills and try to become independent.

It is also important that the child learns the limitations set for him or her by the parents. Setting up the appropriate limitations and expectations are helpful for a child to develop a solid self-esteem.

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The third stage starts when a child enters school. Parental support is needed for the child to turn this into a positive state of self-esteem. At this stage, the child perceives him or herself according to the influence of peers and learns to face new challenges, frustrations and limitations. It is a socialization stage and children need the approval and praise of their parents, adults, teachers, siblings or friends. These relations are helpful in enhancement of their self-confidence and self-esteem and they continue to seek parental support. It is particularly important that a child stays in a supportive environment to maintain the level of his or her self-esteem.

## Helping Children Develop a Healthy Sense of Self-Esteem

The foundations of self-esteem are laid early in life when infants develop attachments with adults like mothers or care-givers who are responsible for them. When adults readily respond to their cries and smiles, babies learn to feel loved and valued. Children come to feel secure and confident by being loved and accepted by people they look up to. As young children learn to trust their parents and others who care for them to satisfy their basic needs, they gradually feel wanted. Self-esteem is also related to children's feelings of belongingness to a group and being able to adequately function in their groups particularly at daycare centres or katchi classes. When toddlers

become preschoolers, for example, they are expected to control their impulses and adopt the rules of family and community in which they are growing. Successfully adjusting to these groups helps to strengthen feelings of belongingness in them.

It is important to note that young children are unlikely to have their self-esteem strengthened from excessive praise or flattery. On the contrary, it may raise some doubts in children; many children can see through flattery and may even dismiss an adult who heaps on praise as a poor source of support-one who is not very believable.

## Ways of Improving Children's Self-Esteem

Following are some important points that are considered to be helpful in strengthening and supporting a healthy sense of self-esteem in a child:

- Children become increasingly sensitive to the evaluations of their peers. Parents and teachers can help children learn to build healthy relationships with their peers.
- When children develop stronger ties with their siblings, friends or peers in school, they begin to evaluate themselves differently from the way they were taught at home. Adults can help children by being clear about their own values and experiences and teach them how to communicate the same outside their homes.
- Children interact with their peers or learn to function in school or some other place, they may feel accepted and liked one moment and feel different the next. Adults can help in these instances by reassuring the child that they are well supported and accepted.
- A child's sense of self-worth is more firm when adults respond to the child's interests and efforts with appreciation rather than just praise. For example, if the child shows interest in participating in what you are doing, you may want to include the child in the activity. In this way, adults respond positively to the child's interest by treating it seriously.
- Praise and immediate rewards distract children from the activity they are interested in. Children may develop a habit of showing interest in a task just to receive an incentive.
- Young children are more likely to benefit from tasks and activities that offer a real challenge rather than

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those that are merely for fun. For example, adults can involve the child in preparing meals or watering plants that enhance his or her abilities and give a sense of accomplishment.

- When children's self-esteem is raised by the adults who are important to them, it promotes confidence in them. Children should be treated respectfully, asked about views and opinions. Their views and opinions should be taken seriously and given meaningful and realistic feedback.
- Adults can help children to develop and maintain healthy self-esteem by assisting to cope with defeats, rather than emphasizing constant successes. During times of disappointment or crisis, children's self-esteem becomes weak. This can be strengthened when adults let children know that 'it's not about winning but the efforts and hard work you put in.
- Adults can help children reflect on the deed or on a challenging situation which may occur. Children are placed in a better position to deal or cope with any occurring situation if they have prior knowledge of overcoming difficulties.



## Conclusion

Most adults and parents want their young children to have a healthy sense of self-esteem. That desire can also be seen in education—schools around the country include self-esteem improvement among their goals. Many observers believe that low self-esteem lies at the bottom of various societal problems. Even though self-esteem has been studied for more than 100 years, specialists and educators continue to debate its precise nature and

development. Nevertheless, they generally agree that parents and other adults who are important to children play a major role in laying a solid foundation for a child's development. Parents and caregivers play an important role in strengthening children's self-esteem by treating them respectfully and expressing appreciation to them. Above all, they must keep in mind that self-esteem is an important part of every child's development.

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