

How to Develop Healthy Self-Esteem in Our Children

by Pauline Matthys

What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is our own perception of our self-worth. Before looking at the Christian version of what self-esteem is, let us examine two examples of where a person's self-worth may lie. These two examples would illustrate two ways of getting it wrong.

First, when a child's self-esteem is propped up artificially, without a solid foundation. This is a child who grows up feeling – and believing – that he is owed respect and admiration just because of who he is. He has been spoilt growing up. In his view, the world seems to revolve around him, his wants and desires. He has a disposition to demand, rather than to give attention to others. He could be a highly talented sports person, who is unable to see past his own self.

Second, when a child's sense of her own intrinsic worth is sorely deficient. This is a child who perceives that self-esteem is based solely on what she can do: the more achievements and awards one gets, the greater the perceived self-worth. Conversely, the less one's goals are achieved, the lesser the perceived self-worth. How is this manifested? This can be the result when kids are pushed excessively hard toward certain goals, oftentimes at the

expense of many other equally or more important aspects of life and living. In this instance, perhaps 'tiger mums' come to our minds? Their self-esteem appear to be tied inseparably to the attainment of success. Kids unduly pick this up from their parents and form a similar mindset.



The Christian understanding of self-esteem is that our self-worth as people is by God, who sacrificed his Son for each one of us. He died for each person. Our self-worth is a tremendous gift to each one of us, and cannot be taken away. It is not dependent upon what we do and how we behave, although this is certainly bound to it.

What is crucial is that our children realise that they are loved unconditionally. Our love for them is not tied to their successes. Let them know that they have our love no

matter what mistakes they make along the way. They don't have to succeed at university or at school to merit our love. Judas may have suffered from a low self-esteem. He could not believe that Christ could love him unconditionally, even after his betrayal. No matter how we have messed up, no matter what we do, we are loved tremendously and have an intrinsic worth.

Parents must teach their children that their love for them can never be lost, and comes with no conditions attached. "I love you if you work hard and do well at school and university." "Or if you star in football." Unfortunately, parents can give a very strong impression to their children that their love comes with strings attached. "If you let me down then I refuse to talk to you, or smile at you."

It can even be that we have very high standards morally or spiritually, which is something that in today's modern society is outstanding. We must encourage, teach, inspire, lead our children to take on these wonderful values and beliefs; however, we cannot lead them to believe that our love for them is dependent on their religious convictions and moral behaviour. We have to have the utmost respect for their freedom as a person.

We must forgive them immediately, and not hold grudges. Even when they disappoint us, and we can certainly let them know and punish them appropriately. There must be that certainty that guarantee your affection, your love and your ongoing respect for them. This is how we teach them of God's love for them. It is unconditional.

We are children of the Father no matter what we have done. His love for us never wavers. It is we who let him down, turned our back upon Him. The children must know that despite everything - and Our Lord died

for us in advance, knowing ahead of time just how each of us was going to let him down - God will always love us. We have to teach the story of the prodigal son to our children, over and over again, in the way we behave in the face of their obvious failures and mistakes.

It all starts in us, the parents

We also have to be aware of where our own self-worth lies. Is it bound up in our successes and failures, or our possessions: or is it tied to who our friends are and how much respect others have for us? Whether we like it or not, we unconsciously teach these lessons to our kids. Furthermore, we have to be careful that our self-worth does not become tied to our children - that we are living our dream through our children, vicariously. Through this, we deny our children their own person, identity and autonomy. It also makes it very obvious that the family is definitely the most fitting place to nurture young lives, and teach them about love, and what is important in life. Who else but the family is the best environment to teach children that they are loved and valued for who they are as a person, rather than what they can do. In the work place, they will be valued chiefly for their productivity.

What can be asserted is that a high self-esteem does not equate to a **HEALTHY** self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem is built on the solid foundation of Christ's love for each one of us, which is irrevocable.

However, we also know that there are many ways that we can help our children build upon this foundation, this gift. They can respond to this incredible gift from God by being responsible, working hard at their study and their jobs around the home. Also, by being a good friend to others, and trying

to get on with people are all very important factors that contribute to our self-esteem.

So while this is not a talk on discipline, it is most certainly crucial to the development of a healthy self-esteem. Children need to learn responsibility; where they fit in in the family and what their responsibilities are. They will then see themselves as part of a whole, rather than as little lords and ladies who arrived on this Earth to be pandered to. We need to develop in them a disposition of gratitude rather than that of entitlement. They need to learn this lesson from a very young age, and discipline and appropriate responsibility for their things and school work are so important.



Very much related to this is humility, and yet this is not so well understood today. Some people have a very negative concept of what it means to be humble. Even though Our Lord himself said: "Learn from me, for I

am meek and humble of heart." Humility is knowing the truth about ourselves, in relation to God and others. It is realising that everything we've got comes from God, all our strengths and weaknesses. It is not downgrading our strengths or pretending we haven't got any. It is the firm realisation that everything we have comes from God, and so we have no reason to boast or feel superior to others. Humility helps us to realise that we are on this Earth to serve God and others, and that our strengths have been given to us as part of that service.

Ways to build healthy self-esteem in kids

Here are fourteen ways to build up that disposition of service to others, which we want to nurture within our children, and which is ultimately at the base of how they will be able to build on that foundation of self-worth that is intrinsic in each one of us.

1. Inculcate discipline and independence in your children, according to what is appropriate to their age, of course. WHY?
2. Encourage them face their problems head-on. In this way, they learn to hone their problem-solving skills, practice "courage under fire" and face reality.
3. Know your child, her temperament, her strengths and her weaknesses.
4. Give genuine praise. Withhold praise when it is not deserved. But you cannot withhold unconditional love. Our self-worth cannot be entirely linked to praise. Tease out that part of their behaviour or attitude that can be held up for confirmation. "Look, what you did

was a mistake, but you were trying to be generous, and I am so happy about that. Your heart was in the right place." Another example: " You were quite right about being angry with your sister over what she did, but your reaction was over the top. In the end, I am censuring you instead of talking to your sister about her rudeness."

5. Remember, confrontation is only a part of discipline. We have to ensure we are also teaching responsibility. Responsibility is taught when children see the consequences of their actions - the good consequences of desirable behaviour, and likewise the bad consequences. "You didn't listen to me, so now you will..." They have to repair, or make up where they make mistakes. Jobs are one way to show reparation for their mistakes, and this is highly encouraged.
6. Teach your children how to get on with others, how to think of others first; not to be a whinger or complainer. When one of them wants a drink, they should think to ask the others: "Who else would like a drink?"
7. Call things by their name. "You cheated." "You told a lie." "You were rude." "That was selfish." John Paul II emphasised this: We should call a sin a sin. Tell them plainly, just as it is. We shouldn't be historical, and dredge every past sin before their eyes, but rather be very, very specific so that it is very clear to your child what you are talking about.

8. Live out the story of the Prodigal Son: the love of the Father brings the child back. Likewise, in the home, it is affection and love that endears the hearts of our children. Affection and cheerfulness in the home should be the norm, and this goes in hand with discipline.
9. Maintain a good balance between discipline and affection. We don't hold grudges. We forgive quickly. We teach them to say sorry, quickly, by our example. We need Our Lord here. We all need to grow in this area. As parents, we ask him often for his help in bringing up our children.
10. Encourage them to be generous. You can also work with someone who has a generous heart, someone who is able to see further than their own pleasure or gain. When they are little, get them to do little jobs for each other, or for their relatives and friends. We all are made to love, that is the meaning of our existence here on this earth. And giving fosters a lot of joy in the heart of the giver as well. We have to let children experience this joy of giving often. It is wonderful to see young men and women who are happy to greet their parents' friends and take the time to find out how they are.



11. Provide venues for them to get along with all sorts of people. They

need to have plenty of chances to build good friendships.

12. Teach them to say "Sorry!"

13. Let them face their problems. Sometimes we as parents want to step in too quickly, in order to settle things for our children. We don't like to see them dealing with stress or failure or out of control situations. Maybe circumstances are like this because our children have been lazy or hurtful to others, and now they have to face unpleasant consequences. It is good to listen to them, to give them criteria as to how to approach the solution. However, it is very important that our children learn how to deal with problems, even if these problems have arisen through no fault of their own. Our job is to steer and guide, but not to take over. When they have managed to make their way through to the conclusion, however rough or rocky, they'll have that experience and a little more confidence in their ability to tackle difficult situations. Furthermore, they will carry with them the impression that Mum and Dad took their ideas seriously. When our children face a tough situation, sometimes we need to discern whether our motives to shield our children stem from a far too sensitive concern about "what others will think." For example, my child has failed her exams because she has been too lazy to study. In a way, we too have to face the truth about our children, and then we can teach

our children to face their problems as well.

14. Never lose an opportunity to use failures as opportunity to teach our children very important lessons about themselves. Deficiencies of character that need to be faced up to; about their strengths, talents and the things they are not so good at. It is good for all of us to realise we have shortcomings, and make mistakes. That is what it is to be human, and it is a good chance in the face of failure to learn humility. This is normal and healthy, and our children need to know that we ourselves can fail, and have to struggle to be better and face up to our responsibilities, and that, even for adults, is not always easy.

To inculcate self-esteem is a balancing act between teaching your children that they have a self-worth that is intrinsic and a realisation that this is an incredible gift from God, and no-one has merited this worth. Even if they behave badly, this gift is not diminished: it is irrevocable. We cannot merit our self-worth that was accomplished when Christ died for us. However, God has called us to be responsible, and to live a life of service, of love. That is how we respond to this gift. We are a part of our family, we have friendships we have to build up, and duties which we have to fulfil. When we are responsible sons and daughters of God, we build up our self-esteem, knowing that this is the way that God wants us to behave and be.

About the author

Pauline is a mother of 10 beautiful kids. Since the early 90s, she and her husband Deon have been organising parenting courses and supporting the Family Club, an odd-group of 50-plus families who meet monthly to form friendships and support each other in developing parenting skills and laying the foundation for bright and cheerful homes.