

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

IFAS EXTENSION

Helping Your School-Age Child Develop a Healthy Self-Concept¹

Millie Ferrer and Anne M. Fugate²

What is self-concept?

A child's self-concept is her belief about how worthwhile she is. Self-concept is how the child sees herself. It is made up of a sense of belonging and being accepted, a sense of being good, and a sense of being capable of doing things well.

A child's self-concept begins to develop at birth. It begins with how adults respond to her. Parents and caregivers create a positive emotional bond with an infant through warm and caring interactions with a lot of eye contact and touch. This positive emotional bond with parents and caregivers promotes a child's healthy self-concept. It is the basis of a relationship in which the child feels the parents' and caregivers' love, acceptance, and respect.

As the child grows into a toddler and pre-schooler, her ability to interact successfully with her environment promotes a healthy self-concept. A child will continue to develop a healthy self-concept when she is given the opportunity to explore her environment, to ask questions without feeling she is a nuisance, and to engage in make-

believe play activities. During this time of exploration, the responsiveness and support of her parents and caregivers will enhance her self-concept. The child's own responsiveness and support of others will also enhance her self-concept. Through her interactions with others she begins to think of herself as being a good person, a valuable part of a group.



As the child enters school, her self-concept is influenced not only by her parents, but also by a growing circle of other people, including teachers and friends. The child gets feedback from many people on her physical appearance and her school, athletic, and social abilities. All of this feedback influences what she thinks of herself, or her self-concept.

A healthy self-concept does not mean that a child thinks she is better than anyone else or can do everything perfectly. It means that she likes herself, feels accepted by family and friends, and believes that she can do things well.

-
1. This document is FCS2205, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida. Publication: February 2003. Reviewed by: Monica Brinkley, county extension director and extension agent IV, and Maisielin Ross, extension agent III. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>
 2. Millie Ferrer, Ph.D., associate professor, and Anne M. Fugate, former coordinator educational/training programs, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap, or national origin. For information on obtaining other extension publications, contact your county Cooperative Extension Service office. Florida Cooperative Extension Service / Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences / University of Florida / Christine Taylor Waddill, Dean

Why is a healthy self-concept important?

A child's self-concept affects how he sees and reacts to situations. For example, a child with a healthy self-concept asks a friend to play and his friend says no. He might think to himself, "Okay, Johnny doesn't want to play now, I will ask someone else." On the other hand, a child with an unhealthy self-concept might interpret the situation differently and think, "Johnny hates me." In another situation, a child with an unhealthy self-concept receives a bad grade on a test. He might think, "I'm stupid," while a child with a healthy self-concept who receives the same grade might think, "I need to study harder for the next test."

A healthy self-concept is the foundation for the positive development and over-all well-being of a child. When a child has a healthy self-concept, he sees himself as being loved, loving, and valuable. A child with a healthy self-concept is also better able to reach his full potential. He does better in school. He is better able to set goals for himself and make decisions. He is more willing to learn new things and try new activities. With a healthy self-concept, a child has better relationships with family members and friends. He can control his behavior and get along with others.

What can parents do to nurture their child's healthy self-concept?

During a child's school years, parents continue to play an important role in the development of the child's self-concept. When a child enters school, he will likely feel unsure of himself as he adjusts to a new environment. He will be evaluated by many people, including peers, teachers, and other adults. He will probably feel a lot of pressure to fit in and succeed. To handle the pressure, he needs unconditional love and support from his parents. With his parents' encouragement, he can conquer tough times in this stage of growth and transition. However, parents cannot just tell a

child that he is great. A child needs not only to hear words, but also to feel within himself that he is a worthwhile, competent person. The following are some strategies to help parents nurture their child's healthy self-concept.

Spend time together. A vital part of a child's self-concept is feeling loved and valued for who she is. One way to let your child know you love and accept her is to spend time with her. With busy lives, it is a good idea to schedule time together. There are many things you can do, such as going to lunch, walking the dog, going for a bike ride, or playing a board game. As long as you both enjoy the activity, it does not matter what you do. What matters is that you are sending your child the message that you like her and want to be with her. During your time together, focus on her strengths and avoid criticizing and lecturing. Do not compare your child with others and do not let your child compare herself with others.



Keep the lines of communication open. Another way to show your child love, acceptance, and respect is to maintain open communication with him. Open communication allows you both to express feelings, share interests, and solve problems. To keep the lines of communication open, listen to your child carefully. Give your child your full attention without disruptions. Sometimes it is hard to listen when you are busy, but try your best to do so. If you really cannot listen to your child at that moment, tell him you will talk later. Then make sure to do so.

Support your child's interests and talents. Children need to feel that they are capable of accomplishing different tasks. This feeling of competence is particularly important to a child's self-concept starting around age 8. You can support your child's feeling of competence by providing learning opportunities in areas that are important to your child. Take time to find out

what your child likes and is good at. Then, offer many chances for him to practice and succeed with a variety of experiences. Do not push your child to do something just because you like it. Avoid judging or criticizing your child's interests or performance. This will only spoil your relationship with him and will cause him to feel inferior.

Praise your child. Let your child know she does things well by praising her. Be specific in your praise. For example, instead of just saying, "Great game," describe what you see: "You really kept up your energy and went after the ball all the way to the end of the game. You must be proud of yourself." Also, do not focus your praise so much on success or completion, which could feel like pressure to achieve. Instead, focus on effort. For example, do not just say, "Good job getting an A on your math test." Instead say, "You were persistent and studied hard to get a good grade on your math test. That's what I call perseverance." When you focus on effort, your child can enjoy little accomplishments on the way to completing a bigger task. With a focus on effort, you are also teaching your child how to deal with obstacles or setbacks—by trying again or working through a problem. As your child gets older, let her tell you what she likes about her accomplishment, what she is proud of. As a child moves towards adolescence, her own self-evaluation becomes more important to her self-concept. She needs to learn how to emphasize her accomplishments and strengths.



Teach your child social skills to make and keep friends. Being accepted by peers is one of the greatest influences on a child's self-concept, so it is very important for a child to learn how to make and keep friends. Parents teach their child a lot of these skills by modeling. That is, your child learns from watching how you meet people and talk to them. You can also help your child make

friends by letting her have other kids over to play. Recognize that it is important for her to feel that she fits in. She and her friends may do things that seem silly to you. If their behavior is not dangerous or offensive, do not sweat the small stuff. When she has a problem with a friend, do not tell her what to do, but listen to her, acknowledge her feelings, and help her think through the problem.

Help your child learn to manage feelings and problem solve. Being able to manage feelings and work out problems are important skills in controlling oneself and getting along with others. When your child talks about how he is feeling, listen. Show you are listening by reflecting what he says. For example, say, "It sounds like you're proud of winning the game." If your child is upset, gently coach him in problem solving. First, help your child identify the situation. For example, say, "It sounds like you're upset because Jamie didn't include you in the game." Then help him brainstorm solutions to the situation at hand. Talk about the solutions he comes up with and have him pick one.

Set clear, reasonable limits. Clear, reasonable limits help a child learn how to make choices and control himself. These are skills he will use in making friends and accomplishing things. Reasonable rules are appropriate to the child's age and allow him to make some choices. For example, a 10-year-old could be expected to vacuum his room and walk the dog, but given some choice about when he does these tasks. When you set rules for your family, involve your child in the process. When your child helps make the rules, he will be more likely to follow them. Once you have established limits, make sure to enforce them consistently.

Assign your child chores around the house. Sometimes it may seem easier to do things yourself, but it is important for your child to do chores. Chores teach children skills and enable them to contribute to the family. They help

children develop a sense of competence and belonging to the group. Have your child start doing simple chores early, so she gets used to doing them. Make sure they are appropriate to her age, so that she can handle them without frustration. As your child matures, continue to adjust her chores to her age. Your child may complain about doing chores. Acknowledge her feelings, but remind her that everyone contributes to the family.



Conclusion

Parents cannot simply give their child a healthy self-concept. A healthy self-concept is the child's own belief about herself, not someone else's opinion. However, parents can do a great deal to nurture their child's healthy self-concept by being responsive and supportive. Parents' love and support help a child handle the challenges of growing up into her own person, a person she likes.

References

- Brooks, J. 1999. *The process of parenting*, 5th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co.
- DeBord, K. 2001. Self-esteem in children. Retrieved April 30, 2002 from the National Network for Child Care Web site: <http://www.nncc.org/Child.Dev/self.pdf>
- Dweck, C. 1999. Caution—praise can be dangerous. *American Educator*, 23(1), pp. 4-9.
- Hamner, T., and Turner, P. 2001. *Parenting in contemporary society*, 4th ed. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Myers-Walls, J., Hinkley, K., and Reid, W. 1989. Encouraging positive self-concepts in children. Publication HE-171 from Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.
- Nuttall, P. 1991. Self-esteem and children. Retrieved May 10, 2002 from the National Network for Child Care Web site: <http://www.nncc.org/Guidance/self.esteem.html>