

Walkin' The Talk Teen & Family Courses



...World Peace Begins IN Me

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This article was published in Hi Prep, a newspaper for secondary schools & youth groups in four western states. Hi Prep's purpose is to present alternatives to further the intervention, prevention and education of drug and alcohol usage.

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM?

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Some interesting results came from a recent study by the National Council on Self-Esteem, a non-profit company. 1,000 teachers and 1,000 parents in Colorado were asked: "Who's responsible for the development of self-esteem in our children?" 72% of the parents responded that it was the teachers' responsibility and 78% of the teachers' responded that it was the parents' responsibility. This reflects the dilemma in our society. Since high self-esteem is the number one deterrent for negative and self-destructive behaviors, it's time to address it.

What is self-esteem and why is it so important? The National Council defines it as "the experience of being capable of meeting life's challenges and being worthy of happiness." This takes a lot of accountability, integrity (with self-honesty as number one) and support. Years ago these traits were cultivated in the home. Family values were a part of every day life with dad at work, mom at home, neighborhood baseball games and Sunday picnics at the local church. Times have changed. In the 40's and 50's our teachers' biggest discipline problems were gum chewing and incomplete homework. Today's schools have resource officers patrolling the halls and parking lots, while students and teachers live in fear of being verbally or physically assaulted. The subtle and overt self-destructive behaviors of drug usage, teen pregnancies, suicides, gang activities, negative peer pressure, adolescent homelessness, and juvenile crimes are at an all-time high. These results clearly mirror our children's lack of self-esteem and frustrations with their own personal and social conditions. Many of our young people are literally being honest when they act out their frustration, rejection, isolation and rage. Their negative feelings are so consuming, they vent them through abuse and destructive behaviors.

Low self-esteem is not just a young person's issue. Studies show that 2 out of 3 Americans struggle with low self-concept. It's time to intervene on the negative behaviors, so we can secure positive environments for everyone. We also know that self-esteem is flexible and malleable, and can be built through relationships with family, friends and co-workers. It's imperative that we learn how to create it in ourselves, first, so it will be modeled for our children. Life skills are often taught without a word.

SELF-ESTEEM IS AN INSIDE JOB

Individual self-esteem begins with responsibility, which happens when we are willing to be honest with ourselves. The problem is that we aren't always aware of our own self-deception. We all need each other. Since change is not about the other guy, it's time we stopped blaming. We can say the problems are with our political leaders, our school administrators, our irresponsible parents, our burnt out faculties, our neglected children, or our unpassed school bonds; and everything will stay the same. We can decide that, "I am doing all I can," as long as it's still about "fixing" someone else. But who is responsible for the behaviors of the one in the mirror? We can say we are not a part of the number one pathological disease in America--denial; and nothing will change.

We must be open to hearing the truth about the negative or self-destructive behaviors we have chosen to recycle. In order to elevate our esteem, it's important to encourage others, especially our children, to be honest with us about our behaviors that hurt them or model low self-esteem. What if we teach our children through example that "I am responsible for my own self-concept and for creating environments that support my happiness and my long term self-worth"? Imagine the cycles of self-abuse and violence we could redirect. Being responsible can lead our young people to break or not start self-destructive cycles. We all blame, deny, get angry, judge, whine, compare, compete and enable ourselves and those around us; so what? Admit it, change it, and get on with what really matters—having relationships that are honest, caring and responsible for supporting everyone in making a difference in our world.

Our first responsibility is to live our own strengths. We must listen to the people we trust in our lives and learn to accept the positive differences we make in our own world. Do we acknowledge ourselves for the contributions we make in the lives of our loved ones? What if we all modeled an accepting humility about our own positive strengths? Why is it so hard and "inappropriate" for us to be honest with our positive behaviors? What if we let others be honest about the "good" and "proud" events in their lives, and then we felt good enough about ourselves that we were happy for them also? If we were totally honest with ourselves, would we have the secret fear that he/she will appear more valuable, so we brush off their accomplishments? Do we want to hear only the "sad" or "bad" news when we ask someone, "How are you?" Responsibility for my self-concept begins with me, and how I share it with others!

TEACHING SELF-ESTEEM

A recent study by the National Foundation on Self-Esteem reflected a sobering result in one California school district: upon entering school, 80% of the first graders scored high on a self-esteem inventory; by the 5th grade, only 20% scored high; and, by the time they graduated from high school, only 5% scored high. This indicated that the longer students stay in school in this district, the lower their self-esteem. So, now, where do we turn?

When it comes to teaching our young people about their own strengths, gifts and self-esteem, they already know what has torn them down and they know what is important to them. A high school junior wrote in a self-esteem workshop: "...I learned the importance of honesty not just to others but to yourself. You don't want to lose yourself in the lies you feed yourself." A junior high student from an at risk alternative school wrote: "I learned that it was really important to solve your problems by talking." Much of the social peer pressure can

derail the emotionally safe environment that needs to be set-up for maximum self-esteem growth in a regular classroom. Teachers are overloaded with curriculum requirements, progress reports on struggling students, piles of paperwork and disruptive behavioral problems. They have little time to add another requirement.

It's our own emotional intelligence that is honored and embraced when we live in high self-esteem. Experiential workshops are the leading educational tool we have for people to explore this science of ourselves. In this setting we can teach ourselves, and our children, how to intervene and redirect the negative thoughts and self-abusive behaviors. We seldom acquire a negative self-concept alone, so the coaching in how to release it and be honest about it is paramount in the development of healthy self-esteem.

The effectiveness of an experiential classroom comes from the interaction and real-life settings that relate directly to a teen's present life issues. Self-esteem is enhanced through the self-reflection that comes from sharing with their peers about betrayal, trust, abandonment, honesty, life-goals, fears, dreams and relationships. They take an active part in their own "self-science." It removes them from their emotional and social comfort zones, out from behind a school desk and listening to a teacher, and it moves them to the position of being responsible for their own self learning. They can't hide from their own behavioral responses in experiential situations, because, however they perceive themselves, positive or negative, it becomes evident. The environment naturally magnifies whatever issues are important in the teen's life at that time. Through the dyads, small groups, games, music, journalizing and other experiential processes, they see for themselves the results of their chosen behaviors. No one tells them. They learn about their strengths and how they can best apply them to their future and their life goals.

Young people are often closer to their own honest inner voice, because adults become comfortable avoiding and denying their own truths. A sixteen year old boy wrote about an in-school self-esteem workshop: "Well, it made me look at my problems and think about them even though it's hard. I also looked at the positive things in my life and how I am and I realized that I am a pretty cool person." Another young girl said: "I learned how I can get my emotions on track. And how to use my emotion appropriately." Our young people are ready to be responsible for their own self-concept, but they need to be coached. They can learn that it's our own emotional intelligence that is honored and embraced when we hold ourselves and others in high esteem.

WHAT CAN I DO?

When we want to lead others to higher self-esteem, we must have the compassion and courage to let them safely reflect what they are feeling. There are a few key steps that can be helpful during a one-on-one (dyad) with someone, and self-esteem is built when we care enough to work together:

- First, let go of any personal issues you may have with this person, his "attitude" or personality type.
- Trust your instincts and listen to the non-verbal messages (including your own). Arms crossed, head down, eyes darting, nervous body movements, all send valid messages. It has been shown that effective, high level communication is 58% visual (body language, etc.), 35% vocal (tone of voice), and 7% verbal (the actual words).
- Put words to what he seems to be feeling or ask him something, "You seem frustrated today." When we mirror or authentically speak about what he might be

feeling, he feels validated and valued; therefore, more confident to honestly express himself.

- The most important step is to ask permission. If you want to share feedback or any less than positive observations about his behaviors, always ask. “Can I be honest with you?” If he says, “no,” let go and sincerely thank him for his honesty. Remember when we ask someone a question, especially a personal one, and we have an agenda or a way we want him to answer, he feels manipulated or set up. It can make things worse.

- Then a critical step is to just listen. Let him speak about what is true for him. Try not to solve his issue, fix it, re-direct his perspective or tell him how wrong he is. Just let him talk. As he speaks in the safety of your acceptance, 99% of the time he will be honest about his own issues and he will come to his own answers.

- The final step is to simply ask him, “What would you like from me?” or “What can I do for you?”

As we listen, we teach him to care, and as we re-learn how to show care for each other, we also learn to care for ourselves again.

We are all responsible for our own self-esteem. When we are honest about our own positive and negative behaviors, we become more responsible for our lives. Acknowledging the mistakes we’ve made and the lessons we have learned from them, as well as our positive strengths, reflects a deeper sense of responsibility. This happens when we live our integrity with the one in the mirror.

As we listen and share with our children, the honest acceptance cultivates caring for one another. They will learn to value themselves as responsible contributors to our society. What greater gift could we ever give anyone, than to value his strengths so he can be honest with himself, and make a positive difference in our world?

How to Build High Self-Esteem, Jack Canfield, 1989. Nightingale Conant Press.

Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman, 1995. Bantam Books.

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