

Low self-esteem

About self-esteem and confidence

Self-esteem is a way a person feels about themselves. Everyone has it in different degrees. A person with high/positive self-esteem generally feels good about themselves and feels they have a lot to offer. A person with low or poor self-esteem generally feels worthless and that they have little to contribute. Without positive self-esteem it is highly unlikely that a person would have a full, happy and productive life. The development of feelings of self-esteem starts very early in life. For example, when a child learns to walk or talk they feel a sense of having achieved something. Praise and encouragement at this point from parents, or people important in their life, boosts the positive feelings they have about themselves and encourages the child to go on achieving. Achievement in itself is not enough. Love, praise and encouragement are essential elements in helping a child develop a positive self-esteem.

Positive self-esteem

Positive self-esteem is what good mental health is all about. It is about being able to look after ourselves and rely on ourselves to deal with challenges when they arise. It is about knowing what we are good at and knowing we have to continue to learn and develop. It is about being comfortable with others and knowing how to relate. It is about believing our thoughts have value and that we have the right to express them. It is *not* about putting others down so that we can feel better about ourselves.

Children with high self-esteem:

- Make friends easily.
- Play as easily in a group situation as by themselves.
- Tend to be problem solvers.
- If unable to solve the problem will look for help.
- Display socially acceptable behaviour.
- Socialise without displaying anxiety.

Low self-esteem

Low self-esteem may be a feature of, or contribute to the development of, a range of mental health problems.

Children with low self-esteem:

- Will probably feel unloved.
- Will tend to avoid new and different situations.
- Are generally unable to deal well with failure.

- Tend to put themselves down. They say things like "I'm stupid" or "I won't be able to do that" (before they have tried).
- Feel their efforts are never quite as good as others.
- Are constantly comparing themselves to their peers in a negative way.

All children will go through periods of feeling low in self-esteem which includes lacking in confidence. This can happen as a result of many factors but is mainly due to the lack of affirming, positive feedback from others.

Some children or young people may appear confident, e.g. loud and arrogant, but actually have low self-esteem. Some children or young people may appear lacking in confidence, e.g. quiet in social situations, but are actually very comfortable with themselves.

It is very easy to improve a child's healthy self-esteem and confidence.

Things to think about

In trying to understand why a child or young person may have low self-esteem, think about:

- What this child/young person has recently been through and how this may be affecting their feelings of self-esteem and confidence, e.g. perhaps they have recently failed an exam, they may have been bullied or they may have suffered a family crisis such as a painful divorce.
- When the child/young person seems more confident/less confident and what factors may be affecting this, e.g. are they more confident when they are with certain people/less confident with others?
- How you and other workers are relating to the child and how this may affect their feelings of self-esteem.

Think about yourself

Self-esteem is an area where your own feelings will have a direct influence on the way you approach the child. Having been through similar experiences can be very helpful for you in your dealings with children, but it is important to be aware that this can also colour your views and dictate your actions. It is important that your actions are taken as a direct result of attempting to help the child not as a means of managing your own emotions. Be aware that if you have feelings of negative self-worth, then it is possible the child will mirror you. Try not to show feelings of pessimism or hopelessness. Be realistic about your abilities/limitations and view these abilities in a positive way.

What you can do

- Be positive and affirming of the child/young person in all situations.
- Think before you speak and try hard not to put them down when you are angry.
- Set an example of being positive and optimistic about life's challenges and realistic about achievement.

- Believe in the child/young person and show it - let them know they are a worthwhile, lovable individual.
- Give praise and positive feedback – children and young people measure their worth and achievements by what other people think of them. For example, you might say "Well done, that was hard, and you managed it".
- Reassure them that it's OK to make mistakes and that it's all part of growing up. Avoid being too critical - this directly damages confidence.
- Acknowledge their feelings - and help them express their feelings in words. For example, encourage them to say, "I'm upset because..." or "I feel happy when...".
- Criticise the behaviour, not the child - be clear that it's an action you're angry about or a behaviour you don't like, not the child you are angry with or the child you don't like.
- Focus on strengths, not weaknesses.
- Respect the child's interests, even if they seem boring to you. Comment to show you're listening.
- Accept that their anxieties are real to them, e.g. fear of monsters in the dark - even if they seem trivial to you, don't just brush them aside.
- Encourage independence - encourage them to take chances and try new things. Succeeding gives a huge boost to confidence, and sometimes they will need to learn by their mistakes.
- Focus on their successes, whatever they can succeed at. Don't focus on their failures.
- Use creativity to help the child express themselves – drama, art, music, etc.
- Help children discover and develop their talents. Finding something that they are good at provides a huge boost to their feelings of self-worth.
- Guard against making comparisons. Always remember the child is an individual.
- Make sure your expectations of them are achievable and realistic. Remember small successes boosts self-esteem while failures can chip away at their self-esteem.
- If you are feeling particularly good about the child mention it. Children often hear negative comments but what you want them to remember and to take forward with them are positive thoughts.
- Help make them feel included in decision making and answer their questions in a thoughtful way. Never respond by saying something like "because I said so".
- Say "sorry" if you get it wrong. None of us are saints, and we may sometimes say something and immediately regret it. If this happens, it's best to immediately admit this to the child. Say: "I should never have said that. It was an unkind thing to say and I don't mean it. I'm just tired. Please forgive me".

What not to do

- Avoid focusing on the child's weaknesses/difficulties and seeing them as a problem to be overcome.
- Don't tell them to "snap out of it" if they are withdrawn.
- Don't ignore them because they are being quiet or shy.
- Don't talk to other workers about them in a way which emphasises their weaknesses, e.g. "she's so clumsy" as this may be overheard by the child.
- Avoid blaming them for something that was beyond the child's control. Let them know that you felt there was nothing they could have done.

When to contact a mental health specialist

- If the child's low self-esteem leads to self-harming behaviour.
- If the child becomes extremely withdrawn.
- If the child starts exhibiting violent behaviour which is unprovoked and out of character or they become very destructive towards objects, e.g. toys.

How to contact a mental health specialist

You should get in touch with your local health centre or hospital to obtain a contact number for the appropriate children and young people's mental health specialists.

Remember - you can contact your local mental health specialists for a number of reasons, for example:

- For advice on how to make a referral about a named child.
- For advice about whether or not to make a referral (it is normal practice to seek this advice without naming the child in the first instance).
- For advice about what to do (once again there should be no necessity to name the child).

By not naming the child you are protecting their right to confidentiality. This method of seeking advice also has the advantage that you do not need to get anyone's consent in advance of your contact phone call.