

Low Self-esteem in Kids - 3 Ways to Help Your Child Now

Self-esteem is a very funny, and oftentimes elusive, quality. I think of it as the feeling that things are going to work out all right, that you can manage the bumps in the road, that you respect yourself, and that you can ultimately accomplish what you set out to do. It's easy for kids to get derailed in their thinking because they are meeting so many challenges on a daily basis.

The sad fact is, many kids who don't have appropriate limits set around their behavior act out, and take out their low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness on others.

If your [child has low self-esteem](#), it's not about what you can say as a parent. The truth is, you can't *say* any one thing to make their situation better. Instead, you have to have an organized approach to how you're going to help your child manage their lack of self-worth—because this is a problem they need to solve in life, just like coming home on time and meeting basic responsibilities.

So the next question becomes, “What should my role be?” I've long taught parents about the three critical roles they should take on in order to help their children feel positively about themselves. They are: the “Teaching Role,” the “Coaching Role,” and the “Limit-Setting Role.” These roles help parents:

The Teaching Role: The Teaching Role is just what it sounds like—you actually teach your child how to solve problems. So when you see that your child isn't feeling good about himself, one of the things you want to do immediately is help him figure out what's causing that lack of self-worth. You're not looking for an answer like, “I had a tough time when I was three.” You want to find out what's going on *now*, what happened today. And then find out what they need to do to address the problem. Are they late on an assignment, is someone picking on them at school, or did they do something they're not proud of?

The whole idea of life is to get to a point with your emotions where you can experience them, but also put them in their proper place while you do the things you have to do. So, if we go to work and we're angry or we're sad or we're frustrated, we put that to the side and do our job. That's our task. And by the way, that's another skill kids have to master in life, and it's also another self-esteem builder.

Here's the deal: you can't solve a problem if you don't identify it accurately. If your carburetor's broken and the mechanic says it's a piston, he's not going to be able to fix your car. Part of the teaching role is helping your child define the problem. So it's learning what you do when somebody tells you “no.” For a child, that's a problem. What do you do when you get an answer wrong in class and you feel dumb because of it? That feeling of low self-worth can also be looked at as a problem. Kids need to learn how to solve those problems and master the

feelings that accompany them. If they can do that as they grow up, they'll be able to solve bigger and bigger problems, which will in turn breed self-confidence.

The Coaching Role: The second step is to coach your child with the skills they already have, just like the coach of a sport would do. For example, if your child is going through a difficult time or learning a new task that's proving to be a challenge for them, try coaching them by saying things like, "You've solved this kind of problem before. You'll solve it again." "What did you do last time that worked for you then?" Or, "You've handled this kind of thing before, Sean, it's going to be okay." You might say, "Jessica, you're doing okay with life. This is just another thing you have to deal with. This was hard for me too, at your age. But I really believe that you can do this. I've seen you do other hard things." And of course, one of the most important things you can ever ask your child: "*How can I be of help? What would you find helpful from me right now?*" That statement gives a child a sense of control. And if he or she says, "It would be helpful for me if you left me alone," you can respond with, "OK, but you know where I'll be if you want to talk about this." How will you know if your child really *needs* to talk about this problem? By their behavior and attitude. If kids refuse to talk about an issue but act out behaviorally or attitudinally, that behavior has to be challenged.

The Limit-Setting Role: The limits for your child should be very clear, even when they're having self-esteem issues. So you can say, "I'm sorry if you're sad or frustrated, or don't feel good about yourself right now, but we're not going to lose sight of the fact that you have to do your homework. That's your job." Or, "I'm sorry you're feeling that way, but you can't take out your anger and frustration on your sister." Give your child appropriate consequences, but work with him to learn how to solve the problem that's blocking him. The sad fact is, many kids who don't have appropriate limits set around their behavior act out, and take out their low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness on others. Without limits and consequences, without that balance of responsibility and accountability, kids may never feel compelled to change and may get stuck in the same "feel bad, take it out on others" cycle, which doesn't solve their problem.

When Kids with Low Self-Esteem Act Out to Solve Their Problems

When kids don't have appropriate limits placed upon them, the acting out behavior they're using to solve their problems becomes a pattern. In fact, the way these kids learn how to have control and mastery over their lives *is* by acting out.

So misbehaving *becomes* their problem-solving skill, because when they've got a problem they can't deal with, they misbehave and strike out at others. Yes, kids with low self-esteem feel difficult feelings—but so does everybody else, all the time. As a parent, your job is to teach them how to deal with their emotions as best you can. I don't care if your child is on medication, I don't care if he has a disability of some kind. If he doesn't learn how to identify and solve the problem that's confronting him, not only is the inappropriate behavior going to continue, but so will the low self-esteem. Believe me, this will have consequences during the course of your child's entire life.

Realize that there is some place in an out-of-control child's mind where they know this isn't really right. They think they're weird and they think they're bad. When I say to a kid, "Well,

you know, you get in trouble a lot but your brother doesn't. Why do you think that is?" And they say, "Well, he's a goody-goody. That's why." If you get right down to it, what that child is saying is that there's something wrong with him, and he's angry about it. And so the acting out masks that self-perception and makes him feel more in control.

Make no bones about it: for kids who act out to solve their problems, your role is the same: Teach, Coach and Set Limits.

By the way, you also need to accept the fact that your child is going to feel bad pretty frequently, that they are going to have bad days and good days. Don't think you have to fix all of that—because you don't and you can't, even if you wanted to. It's just that simple. Many parents get into useless conflicts with their kids because they're trying to fix their child's emotional state, instead of teaching their child how to deal with it themselves by coaching them through their problems and setting limits around their behavior.

The truth is that dealing with adversity of any kind develops self-esteem, whether it's completing a difficult assignment, managing your emotions when you feel frustrated, or failing a test and being able to pick yourself up and try again. If you look around you, you'll see adults who seem to do OK in life, and you may wonder what their secret is. Here's the truth: it's not that they don't have any problems, it's that they accept that problems are a part of life. Not only that, but they have a way of trying to manage and solve them that works. If you can teach your child to accept that life has problems and show them ways to deal with those problems, they'll have a lot more peace of mind. Certainly they'll feel better than someone who's trying to make all the problems go away so they can relax—because all the problems are *not* going away. Feelings of self-esteem lead ultimately to peace of mind, or what we also call "serenity."

And in the end, serenity comes from the acceptance of problems, not the absence of them.

1. Teach their child how to identify the problem at hand.
2. Guide their child as they learn how to solve their problems.
3. Set limits on their child's behavior, which ultimately shows kids how to be more independent as they develop.