pact's point of view
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# Self Esteem and Adoption

## by Kenneth Watson

How we see ourselves — our self-image — and how we value our ourselves — our self-esteem — are critical both to the way we manage our everyday affairs and to the satisfactions we get from our lives. A healthy self-image means that we recognize the boundaries of our own autonomy, accept responsibility for our actions within that framework, yet believe those boundaries are not fixed. Good self-esteem can be defined as our ability to be satisfied with what we are at the moment, yet remain confident that we can become what we aspire to be.

**The Development of Self-Esteem**

A central task of childhood is defining and coming to value one's "self." Gaining self-esteem is a developmental process that begins in infancy and is inextricably tied into children's early caretaking experiences. As their basic needs are met, their sense of being worthwhile develops. This process begins before they have developed the capacity to cognitively process their life experiences. Infants' early sense of value is the result not of what they "think" but of the feelings they experience in their interaction with nurturing adults. As they are loved and cared for by their parents or primary caretakers, they "realize" they are valued and loved. At some level they "recognize" that they cannot meet their basic needs themselves. They "sense" that there are things in their world that can hurt them. They "know" they need to be cared for and protected. Since they are cared for and protected, they then must be of value. With that realization comes the fear of the loss of their protective caretakers, and children begin to wonder what they must do to continue to merit this continuing attention. Self-esteem flourishes in those children who sense that it is not what they do that makes them valuable; but what they are. They begin to feel valued for themselves and for their uniqueness.

A sense of security, good caretaking, and a respect for uniqueness, then, form a foundation upon which children's actual accomplishments can be placed. Once children have learned they are lovable, they need to learn that they are capable. As they master each new developmental task, they feel more confident about themselves. Without a solid foundation, their accomplishments are never enough; without the accomplishments, the foundation is inadequate in a world where they must grow, face challenges, and make decisions.

Although children's self-esteem is initially shaped by the perceptions of others (and it will always be influenced by those external perceptions), once their cognitive capacity develops (about age four or five), children begin to "think" about what makes them worthwhile. They try to fit together their impressions and think about themselves. Ultimately, the picture of self that they have internalized is more important than how others view them and what others say. If the inner picture of self is not clear and of value, children reflect what they believe others want to see. They develop the skill of impression management.. Such behavior detracts from the development of their self-esteem because they then learn how to avoid negative criticism, rather than how to cope with it, and in the coping process to feel better about themselves.

**Self-Esteem and Adopted Children**

Adopted children are vulnerable to self-esteem problems. There are two kinds of self-esteem difficulties: situational, which means that one feels bad about oneself in some areas, or at some times, but not always; and global, which means that one feels inadequate in most areas most of the time. A global self-esteem problem usually has its roots in early experiences of abuse or abandonment. Children placed in adoption are more vulnerable to this kind of difficulty because of their sense of "abandonment" by their birth parents, no matter what the circumstances. When children talk about adoption, they express this concern. They never ask, "Why did my birth parents arrange for my care by another set of parents?" or, "Why did my birth parents transfer parental responsibility through legal action?" Instead they ask, "Why did my parents give me away?" Some adopted children feel even more vulnerable because of their life experiences before becoming anchored in an adoptive family.

Children's explanations of what threatens them are usually self-centered. In seeking an explanation for parental abandonment, adopted children wonder what is wrong with them, since their birth families did not want them. It is that inexplicable "primal" rejection that leaves adopted children with a weak core at the center of their self-image. This sense of initial inadequacy may be reinforced for older children by the negative impact of the lack of consistent, effectual interaction during their early months; by the lack of physical care and protection and the possibility of abuse by their earlier caretakers; by insecurity caused by a series of intermittent and changing caretakers; and perhaps by earlier foster or adoptive parents who placed greater emphasis on achievement than on intrinsic value.

**Techniques for Helping Children with Self-Esteem**
Helping children increase their self-esteem is an ongoing process that has two parts: the everyday efforts to generate an environment which supports self-esteem development, and the unique opportunities offered when children suffer an acute blow to their self-image which results in a "self-esteem crisis."

Parents can help establish an environment which nurtures self-esteem in their children on an ongoing basis if they can:

**Be consistent in what they say and then follow through.**
They must not leave the children wondering if there is something wrong with them because they can't seem to get their parents' messages straight.

**Avoid "globalization."**
Parents should be specific in their praise and in their criticism. For instance, instead of saying, "You did a good job washing the car, David," they could say, "The car looks great, David, and I particularly liked the way you remembered to clean the dashboard inside." Instead of saying, "You did a bad job of cleaning your room, Eleanor," they might say, "Although your room looks a little better, Eleanor, I expected you to do more than just pile the things from your desk into the closet."

**Allow their children choices.**
Making choices helps children build confidence in their judgment. Parents must limit the choices to rule out those that are impossible and those that might endanger people or property; then they must be ready to support any choice that their children make — without editorial comment.

**Encourage ability.**
Parents can help their children become expert at something — to develop a skill, have a hobby, acquire some information — that will make them feel better in some one area than anyone else in their family or in their circle of friends. Then the parents should provide opportunities for their children to show off their specialty to others, or to teach others about it.

Children face "self-esteem crises" at times when the magnitude of failure at some particular thing either eclipses their past successes or reconfirms for them that they are "total failures." Parents, or other caring adults, can turn such a self-esteem crisis into an opportunity to enhance a child's self-esteem by following three steps — in order. They are:

1. Accept the child's feelings of worthlessness. This is the hardest step, but one that cannot be skipped. It means letting children "own" their feelings of pain and despair, even if things do not appear to us as the children see them. It means that when a child says, "I'll never amount to anything — I'm just no good!" the adult must resist saying, "Of course you will, look at all of the things you can do." It means that when a child says, "I'm hopeless, nobody can ever love me," they must resist saying, "Of course they can — and do. I love you." Children who are hurting must sense that those adults who wish to help them are not denying them the pain they are experiencing. Of course adults do not have to agree that the children's premises are accurate, only that their pain is real. They can do this by the silent acceptance of the feelings of the children; by an empathetic sigh or hug; by a soft sad exclamation like, "Oh..." or, if they must use words, by acknowledging the child's suffering by a statement such as "What a terrible way to feel." And then they must wait and endure with the children the pain the children are feeling; perhaps, if they can, by finding a feeling of similar pain within themselves.

2. Provide an opportunity for the child to build competence through achievement. When children sense that their parents, or other caring adults, are tuned into their pain, the adult's new goal is to add to the children's sense of achievement by arranging for them to participate in some activity that will result in success. Parents need to look for a specific "task" that is developmentally appropriate and falls within the range of the child's abilities or potential at that moment. They must be careful that the activity is not too trivial or too general. The point is to set the child up for honest success.

3. Reinforce achievement with honest praise. Once children have experienced success, they should be praised simply, honestly, and directly. For instance, a parent might say, "You did a good job cutting the lawn today, Mary." As a child's self-esteem grows, parents can begin to build-in the mechanism of self-praise. For such children they might say instead, "You must feel good about the fine job you did cutting the lawn today, Mary." For children with a yet stronger self-esteem, they might say, "How do you feel about the good job you did cutting the lawn today, Mary?" An even more "self-determining" level of praise would be, "How do you feel about the job you did cutting the lawn today, Mary?" Using children's names on all occasions of praise reinforces the children's sense that the achievement belongs to them.

It is difficult for parents to follow these three steps in sequence. When their children despair over a particular failure or their sense of total incompetence, most parents rush to deny the child's pain and reassure with praise. The counter-intuitive response of "going with the pain" is difficult. If parental reassurance and children's subsequent achievements are to have impact on the self-image of the children, however, those children must first know that their parents, or other caring adults, are aware of the level of their pain, and are willing to help share it. If children do not sense adult empathy, they may assume that those adults are too dense to understand the pain, or too callous to realize its impact.

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