

## The Power of Self-Esteem: Build It and They Will Flourish

*Jim Paterson*

The term "self-esteem," long the centerpiece of most discussions concerning the emotional well being of young adolescents, has taken a beating lately.

Some people who question this emphasis on adolescent self-esteem suggest that it takes time and attention away from more important aspects of education. Others contend that many of the most difficult adolescents suffer from too much self-esteem and our insistence on building higher levels is detrimental to the student and to society.

But many experts and middle school educators stand firm in their conviction that since self-worth is rigorously tested during the middle school years, attention to it can only help students become successful. Perhaps, they say, self-esteem simply has not been defined properly or the strategies used to build it have done more harm than good.

For example, "Praising kids for a lack of effort is useless," says Jane Bluestein, a former classroom teacher, school administrator, speaker, and the author of several books and articles on adolescence and self-esteem. "Calling a bad job on a paper a 'great first draft' doesn't do anyone any good. I think we've learned that. If I'm feeling stupid and worthless and you tell me I'm smart, that makes you stupid in my eyes," she says. "It doesn't make me any better."

But Bluestein and others say that simply because the corrective methods are misguided doesn't mean middle school educators should not pay close attention to their students' self-esteem.

Jan Burgess, a former principal at Lake Oswego Junior High School in Oregon, explains, "We've all seen kids whose parents believe self-esteem is absolutely the highest priority. But heaping praise without warrant is empty praise. Self-esteem is important, and it comes from aiming high and reaching the goal. That is much more meaningful."

On the other hand, James Bierma, a school counselor at Washington Technical Magnet in St. Paul, Minnesota, says he is wary of those who want to reduce praise for students. "I don't see heaping praise on kids as a big problem. I work in an urban area where we have more than 85% of students in poverty. I wish our students received more praise," he says. "You can go overboard, but that rarely happens in my dealings with families. Students respond well to praise from parents and school staff."

Robert Reasoner, a former school administrator and the developer of a model for measuring and building self-esteem that has been adopted by schools throughout the United States, says there has been a lot of confusion about the concept of self-esteem.

"Some have referred to self-esteem as merely 'feeling good' or having positive feelings about oneself," says Reasoner, who is president of the National Association of Self Esteem. "Others have gone so far as to equate it with egotism, arrogance, conceit, narcissism, a sense of superiority, and traits that lead to violence. Those things actually suggest that self-esteem is lacking."

He notes that self-value is difficult to study and address because it is both a psychological and sociological issue and affects students in many different ways.

"Self-esteem is a fluid rather than static condition," says Sylvia Starkey, a school psychologist and counselor for 16 years in the Lake Oswego School District. She notes that the way adolescents view themselves can depend on how they feel about their competence in a particular activity. It also is influenced by the child's general temperament and even family birth order, all of which might make it harder to identify the causes of low self-esteem—or raise it.

Reasoner says self-esteem can be defined as "the experience of being capable of meeting life's challenges and being worthy of happiness." He notes that the worthiness is the psychological aspect of self-esteem, while the competence, or meeting challenges, is the sociological aspect.

He notes that when we heap praise on a student, a sense of personal worth may elevate, but competence may not—which can make someone egotistical. Self-esteem, he says, comes from accomplishing meaningful things, overcoming adversity, bouncing back from failure, assuming self-responsibility, and maintaining integrity.

## Self-Esteem at the Middle Level

Middle school students are particularly vulnerable to blows to their self-esteem because they are moving to a more complex, more challenging school environment; they are adjusting to huge physical and emotional changes; and their feelings of self-worth are beginning to come from peers rather than adults, just at a time when peer support can be uncertain, Reasoner says.

"Early on, it's parents who affirm the young person's worth, then it's the teacher. In middle school, peer esteem is a powerful source of one's sense of self," according to Mary Pat McCartney, a counselor at Bristow Run Elementary School in Bristow, Virginia, and former elementary-level vice president of the American School Counselors Association. No matter how much students have been swamped with praise by well-meaning parents, she says, what their friends think of them is most important.

Beth Graney, guidance director at Bull Run Middle School in Gainesville, Virginia, says adults gain their self-esteem through accomplishments and by setting themselves apart from others, while adolescents gain it from their group. "Peer relationships are so critical to kids feeling good about themselves," she says.

## Opportunities to Succeed

The solution, rather than praising without merit, seems to be providing students with an opportunity to succeed.

"Self-esteem that comes from aiming high and reaching goals helps build resilience for students as well," says Burgess. She says teachers can help kids target their learning and fashion goals that are obtainable, while giving them constructive feedback along the way. "Self-esteem rises and students feel in charge—and this can help parents understand how to heap praise when it is earned."

Bluestein says students often want an opportunity to feel valued and successful. As a group, they can perhaps make a simple decision in class (which of two topics they study first, for example) and individuals might gain from helping others, either collaboratively or as a mentor or tutor. She suggests having students work with others in a lower grade level. As a result, the self-esteem of the students being helped also improves.

"Peer helpers, lunch buddies, peer mentors often help kids feel that someone is in their corner and can help them fit in with a larger group," Graney says. She says parents should encourage their children to find an activity that they like where they can have some success and feel accepted.

Bluestein recalls a program she began in which her "worst kids" who seemed to have lower levels of self-worth were asked to work with younger students. Their sense of themselves improved, she says, and eventually they were skipping recess or lunch periods to work with the younger students.

Mary Elleen Eisensee, a middle school counselor for more than 30 years at Lake Oswego Junior High School, says if kids can be "guided to accept and support one another, the resulting atmosphere will be conducive for building self-confidence and esteem for everyone."

## Special Care for Special Students

Michelle Borba, nationally known author and consultant on self-esteem and achievement in children, says there are five things middle school educators can do easily to improve the self-esteem of their students:

- **Mentor a child.** Find one student who looks as though he or she needs a connection and just take a little more time (even one minute a day) to find a positive moment.
- **Connect with your team about a student.** Pass on concerns to at least one other staff member so you're both on the same page. You can then reinforce the same positive traits about a student together and optimize the effort.
- **Reframe children's images of themselves.** Find one positive trait that is earned and deserved—artistic, great smile, kind heart—and let the student be aware of it. Reframing an image generally takes 21 days, so reinforce the same trait 10 seconds a day for 21 days.
- **Turn students on to a great book, Web site, hobby, or a club** that might capitalize on their natural interests or strengths.
- **Make yourself available.** Give students your e-mail address and let them know special times you can be reached.

## **Adult Affirmation Is Important**

Adults play a role, too, by helping students find areas where they can have success and making note of it when they do. They can also just notice students.

"Legitimate affirmation makes a huge difference. But plain recognition is just as meaningful. Greeting a student by name even pays big dividends," says Starkey. She says adult volunteer tutors and mentors help students with social and academic skills and encourage them. An assessment of factors that promote self-esteem in her school district showed such adult attention is very valuable.

At Bierma's school, counselors call parents on Fridays when students' scores on achievement, attendance, academic, and behavior goals are announced. "It has helped students turn negative behaviors into positive ones."

McCartney says simply treating students respectfully and listening carefully affirms a student's self-worth. She says teachers can also bolster self-esteem if they allow the students to accidentally "overhear key adults bragging about one of their accomplishments."

Reasoner points out that despite thinking to the contrary, strong self-esteem is critical in the middle school years. Students without it withdraw or develop unhealthy ways of gaining social acceptance, often by responding to peer pressure to engage in sex, drinking, drug abuse, or other harmful behaviors.

"Many of these problems can simply be avoided if a child has healthy self-esteem," Reasoner says.

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