



Self-Esteem is Over Rated Go for a Sense of Mastery

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“Raising an inspired child includes raising a child who is willing to take the risks required to pursue their passions and move past inevitable challenges to achieve their biggest dreams and desires”.

Dr. Katherine

This Article Will Help You

Teach your child to be persistent, to have grit, to take on challenges. In short, to feel a sense of personal mastery.



Watch Out if You Focus too Much on Feeling Good!

So, for years our children have been surrounded by adults scurrying around protecting and propping up how they feel about themselves.

I know from experience that it's easy as a parent to be tempted to rush in and prop up our children's feelings when we see them failing or even struggling with some activity.

We parents have been told, "Children need to feel good about themselves!" In fact, this mantra has been pounded into us for years. We are encouraged to "protect" our child's self-esteem and say and do things to make our children feel good about themselves when they face failure.

Teachers and schools have also been told for years that they need to "build" children's self-esteem. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on self-esteem programs and self-esteem books for all ages. So, for years our children have been surrounded by adults scurrying around protecting and propping up how they feel about themselves.

Big mistake.

Problem is, we are actually weakening, not strengthening, our children when we smooth over, cover up, make better or prevent their having or dealing with feelings of failure, rejection, sadness, disappointment, and hurt. Remember, I'm not talking about ignoring trauma! But there's trauma and there's *trauma*. There are many undesirable outcomes for



kids if adults around them have a style of making mountains out of molehills.

It's not that we *can't* make our children feel better about themselves. We can, and that's the rub. We parents are very powerful! Our words and actions *can indeed* make our children feel more comfortable, seemingly "happier" by reducing their uncomfortable feelings or deflecting self-criticism. By "engineering" activities and experience in their early years we *can* nearly guarantee that our children will be 100% successful in everything they try. And it's easy to want to see our children succeed!

However, engineering successes is not an effective parenting strategy.

It is NOT empowering to our children if we just insure they feel good about themselves. The research is clear on this point.

Trouble is that high self-esteem and a sense of competence and optimism don't go hand in hand.

Surveys show that compared to prior generations, many more American adolescents and young adults today describe themselves as "special," "unusual," "exceptional". Self-esteem surveys show our young people feel good about themselves! Of course, it's fine to feel good about oneself, I'm not arguing that - certainly it makes life a lot more comfortable.

Trouble is that high self-esteem and a strong sense of competence and optimism don't necessarily go hand in hand.



Second trouble is, high self-esteem alone won't give your child grit or an optimistic outlook, attitudes that are crucial for success and happiness. In fact, there is no evidence that shows high self-esteem causes us to *act* any certain way.¹

We know that our culture of creating high self-esteem has NOT boosted our young people's ability to thrive when they leave the security of childhood and home and face the challenges of college and/or the stress of work.

A huge amount of data show there is a precipitous rise in depression, anxiety, binge drinking and other psychological problems in American teens and young adults, especially in our high achieving elite college students.² Yet, these are the same youth who feel extra special, unusual and exceptional!

So, what *can* we do to help our children cope effectively in the uncertain and rapidly changing future?

We know it IS empowering to your child if you encourage your child's sense of independent mastery by focusing and reinforcing their willingness to persist, to take risks, to go the extra mile, to move forward despite anxiety, to handle random setbacks, to face boredom, etc.

It IS empowering to your child if they face up to their mistakes and at the same time explain the cause of their mistakes in a specific empowering way (see below).

Let me first talk about what NOT to do as a parent if you want your child to be persistent and optimistic. Then I will talk about what TO DO.



Four Ways to Weaken Your Child

If parents mostly focus on making their children feel good about themselves they take away their children's power.

You Weaken Your Child if you Micromanage Their Feelings

First, if you micromanage your kid's feelings and moods by propping them up, you will prevent your children from developing internal strategies for dealing with inevitable negative feelings and you will weaken your children's ability to handle life's disappointments. The child will develop a *victim mindset* where feelings are seen as uncontrollable and coming from external sources.

People are not born with grit and the ability to persist. It is learned through practice.

You Weaken Your Child if You Prevent Them From Experiencing Setbacks

Second, if you prevent your children from fully experiencing setbacks you also prevent them from practicing grit and persistence. Your child will be more likely to be a *quitter*. People are not born with grit and the ability to persist. It is learned through practice.

In order for children to develop a sense of persistence they have to frequently practice the following sequence of events: effort, setback, retry, success in the end. When children experience this sequence of events (effort, setback, retry, success) they develop a sense of mastery - a sense of competence and optimism.

So you want to have your child participate in activities where they face challenge, persist through setbacks, and finally celebrate success.



Remember, I am not recommending exposing children to impossible odds to “toughen them up”. Challenge is the key. We now know that human brains thrive and improve when faced with challenges.

So, strongly encourage your children to challenge themselves and keep trying until they succeed. Let them succeed on their own and let them make their success their own without your interference or over involvement.

It is also important to teach your child to be open to the notion that success might not look like they thought it would.

Sometimes when things don’t turn out like we thought they would, we see failure. This creates disappointment and sadness.

Instead, better to see failure as an opportunity. Super succeeders are attuned to seeing opportunity where others see failure. They stay alert for unexpected outcomes and are ready to embrace victory even though the outcome is unexpected.

You Weaken Your Child if You Teach Them to Lower Expectations to Avoid Disappointment

The third way to weaken your child is by communicating directly or indirectly that feeling bad is to be avoided. If you do this, you are really teaching your children to lower their expectations when faced with a challenge because your child will learn to set limiting goals in order to avoid down feelings that come with inevitable setbacks and disappointments.

You don’t want your child to learn to *downsize hopes*. You want your child to know that discomforting feelings are a normal part of life -



unpleasant maybe - but not something to be feared or avoided at the cost of limiting dreams!

You Weaken Your Child if Teach Them Feeling Badly has No Benefit

Fourth, feelings of sadness, anxiety and anger are useful adaptations of the human psyche. These feelings let us know when we experience loss, danger and trespass. If you communicate that these feelings are to be avoided you take away your child's protective internal voice. This *diminishes* your child's *inner guidance* system.

Six Ways to Empower Your Child

"Children need to learn to believe that failures are mere setbacks that they themselves can overcome."

Children can learn the success attitude of personal mastery if you do a few things to create such learning.

To become powerful capable adults with a sense of confidence and a willingness to have high expectations and big life goals, children need to learn they can independently master challenges they face. They need to learn to believe that failures are mere setbacks that they themselves can overcome.



✓ **Tell Your Child the Facts of Life About Failure and Frustration**

Begin today by simply telling your children what I have just told you - how failure and disappointment or anger and frustration is a required part of fulfilling big dreams. Then make sure YOU live this philosophy.

✓ **Share Your Own Failures and Disappointments and Your Efforts at Persistence**

Talk about your own daily failures and disappointments and your willingness to persist (don't share your failures if you are not also able to show your kids your persistence) and continuously express your belief in your ultimate success.

✓ **Let Your Child Experience Setback and Discomfort**

Allow your child to actually experience and overcome setbacks. This takes *having* uncomfortable feelings and unwanted outcomes. Don't step in every time to try to take away disappointed feelings. These experiences of setback and mild anxiety *empower* children! Trying to always make things easier now will make things harder in the future.

By learning that they can go on even if they feel anxious gives children a sense of self-competence and willingness to take risk. By learning that setbacks are just information on the road to success gives children a sense of optimism.

✓ **Trust Your Child to Figure Out How to Handle Setback**

Trust your child to actually figure out for himself or herself how to handle uncomfortable feelings. Your trust in their ability to handle setback will give them the confidence to handle it and have a sense of confidence for handling other setbacks.



✓ **Refrain From Commenting on Your Child's Performance**

Another way to help your child build a sense of mastery is to refrain from judging your child's performance - even positive judgement. When you take your child to extracurricular activities refrain from commenting on their performance. Let it be their thing and stay out of it.

Sometimes, ask your child how they feel about their performance. Don't share how *you* feel about it - it's about how *they* feel about it. Are they satisfied with it? What's another way to look at the outcome? Will they do something differently next time? If so, what and how will they make that happen?

✓ **Take the Pressure off of "Achieving"**

Never criticize your child for coming in second best. Help your child strive toward excellence, not perfectionism. Perfectionism is one of the most disempowering mindsets a person can acquire.

You want your child to be willing to take risks. If you require them to always come in tops they will stop taking the risks required to achieve greatness. Perfectionism also leads to deep anxiety and depression.

To have grit and persistence, to be willing to go from good to great, children do not have to feel they are special. They just have to feel they can cope.

¹ The Optimistic Child by Martin Seligman, 2007, Houghton Mifflin Co.

² A Nation of Wimps by Hara Estroff Marano, 2008, Broadway Books.



About the Author

Katherine A. Larson, Ph.D. is Researcher Emeritus in education from the University of California and during the past twenty years has authored many articles and directed many notable research studies on youth and families. Her work is sighted in the prestigious What Works Clearinghouse as well as many professional journals and books. Dr. Larson has been trained in neurolinguistic programming and other personal success courses. She has been a parent coach for the past eleven years and is the parent of a son and daughter. Dr. Katherine is the President and Chief Instructor of Raise Inspired Kids.