

FOSTERING SELF-ESTEEM: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Unfortunately, in order to foster positive self-esteem many educators purchase a wealth of materials that espouse the popular, and misleading, belief that simply telling kids that they are wonderful, terrific, nice, etc. builds self-esteem. Instead of wasting time and time on such ineffective self-esteem building exercises, **educators should devote attention to everyday classroom techniques such as the following:**

- **Demonstrate social support by showing personal interest in every individual student. Granted, elementary teachers have more time for this than most high school teachers, but it still can be done at every grade level. For example:**
 - Discover each student's strengths, interests, favorite sports, hobbies, television shows, books, family background, etc., and refer to this information during daily discourse with the individual student and the class. Such information can be gathered by distributing a simple survey (e.g., What are your favorite hobbies? What do you enjoy doing the most?), by asking students to write about what they are most proud of or what they do best, by personally interviewing each student, or by having students interview one another and report their results to the class. Students also can be asked to develop an autobiography in which they profile their backgrounds, achievements, hobbies, and future goals.
 - Demonstrate sincere concern and strong support for students during times of need and hardship. Encourage students to do the same with their peers. One way to discover when students need emotional support is by requiring a journal in which students may (but are not required) to express emotional needs.
- **Consistently demonstrate respect, acceptance, and care toward all students, regardless of their backgrounds and past or present behavior.**
 - When addressing misbehavior, the message should be that although the student's misbehavior is unacceptable, the student is always acceptable and worthwhile. Avoid attacks on the student's character and instead focus your remarks on the student's behavior (e.g., instead of "you're irresponsible," say "what you did was irresponsible").
 - Draw a distinction between students' feelings and their behaviors. Teach students that, "all feelings are okay but all behaviors are not okay." For example, emphasize that it is "okay" for them to feel angry, but that it is "not okay" for them to express their anger in a way that could hurt themselves or others. One way that students can often express their feelings without hurting anyone is simply by telling someone how they feel.

- Display a positive and optimistic attitude. Even when working with students with the most challenging behavior problems, demonstrate confidence that their behavior will improve. Research shows that effective classroom managers view every day “as a new day” and do not hold the past behaviors of students against them (Brophy, 1996).
- View mistakes of behavior as learning experiences, not failures. Use these mistakes as opportunities to teach students more responsible behavior.
- Exhibit random acts of kindness, and encourage students to do the same.
- **Avoid social comparisons (e.g., posting of grades). Encourage students to compare their performance (including in behavior) not to that of their peers but to personal goals or previous performance** (e.g., instead of saying “Why don’t you act like others in the class?” you should say “Your behavior is much better than last week when you showed that you can ignore others when they bother you”).
- **Avoid public humiliation.** When possible, handle discipline problems privately, and not publicly.
- **Garner social support from others, especially parents and peers, to help booster positive emotions and behavior.** A two-minute phone call home, informing parents that their child could use some emotional support after experiencing an unexpected failure, is likely to be time well spent.
- **To help protect feelings of autonomy, and thus self-esteem, apply only as much external regulation as necessary to bring about compliance.** Referred to as the *Principle of Minimal Sufficiency*, educators should use “just enough” external pressure to bring about compliance without making students feel that they are being coerced. When external pressure is not obvious, students tend to believe that they perform a requisite behavior for reasons that are intrinsically motivated, and thus are more likely to engage in that behavior in the future.

From: Bear, G. G., & Manning, M. A. (in press). Developing emotional competencies and self-discipline. In G. G. Bear, *Developing self-discipline and preventing and correcting misbehavior*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Additional Resources:

Building self esteem in children. (2003). Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Page, R. (2000). *Fostering emotional well-being in the classroom.* Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett Publishers.

www.cln.org/themes/self_esteem.html: Self Esteem Theme Page.

www.cyberparent.com/esteem/: About Self Esteem in Children.

www.iamfoundation.org/KidsSelfEsteem.html: Kids' Self Esteem.