



"I was a Better Parent Before I had Kids!"

An Interactive 6-session Parenting Series exclusively for parents of our preschool with School Psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Dobkowski.



Parent Enrichment Program Session 3 Discussion Notes

Topic: "The Confident Child: Raising Children to Believe in Themselves"

This discussion was led by School Psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Dobkowski on Feb 12th, 2013.

The discussion notes below were written by Dr. Dobkowski.

I. Introduction

- Self-esteem is an extremely valuable and protective attribute for all individuals (especially children).
- It is linked to numerous positive outcomes. Children with high self-esteem have more friends, perform better academically, have a wider range of coping skills, and are more resilient. A healthy sense of self-worth is an essential building block for a life of happiness and success.
- What is it, and why does it get so much attention?
 1. Most people think that self-esteem means feeling good about oneself. A more accurate definition is recognizing and accepting both your strengths and weaknesses.
 2. You discover your strengths and weaknesses from the effects of your actions and how others see you. Good self-esteem comes from actual accomplishments and accepting your limitations when you need help from others.
 3. Self-esteem cannot be manufactured out of thin air. It cannot be simply implanted by others' comments (it can be interfered with by too much criticism or too much unearned praise). Self-esteem is not bestowed rather it is earned.
 4. Self-esteem is cultivated internally. It is the result of competence and confidence.
 5. To be clear, realistic praise and encouragement can help to bolster confidence but it cannot supply it.
- Why is the problem of low self-esteem and confidence so pervasive in children nowadays?
 1. Children from the previous generation were placed into roles that required a high level of responsibility and independence at a very young age. Today's children are overly reliant on their parents and are being overprotected from unhappiness and hardship.
 2. The current preoccupation with having "exceptional" children makes it difficult for children to maintain a consistent positive sense of self because they are expected to be exceptional at all things.
 3. This attitude places a powerful demand on children and creates excessive self-focus and relentless desires to be the best. Anything less is considered a failure. It has led to an epidemic of exaggerated and negative self-consciousness in children.
 4. The ability to hold contradictory opinions about oneself (acknowledging one's strengths and weaknesses) is a critical part of developing a comfortable sense of self.
 5. For the past two decades caring parents have been told that teaching their children they are special will produce positive self-esteem and lasting happiness. Offering excessive approval, praise, and enthusiasm disrupts a child's growing ability to discern the truth about his/her own effects and behavior.
- How do we build a sense of confidence and belief in our children?

II. Importance of Adversity

- Self-confidence means that you trust yourself and feel assured that you can handle whatever comes up. That you know what to do in the face of challenge.
- This kind of confidence grows primarily through overcoming adversity. It grows through experience as a child comes to know what his strengths and weaknesses actually are.
- In order to feel self-confident, you have to face and overcome difficulties.
- The challenge for parents today is that we are over problem-solving for our children. We eliminate any opportunity for our children to work through difficulty and come out on the other side, knowing they have solved a problem and can do it again.
- Paul Bohn, a psychiatrist at UCLA, believes many parents will do anything to avoid having their children experience even mild discomfort or disappointment (ex: a toddler who is running in the park and trips on a rock. Some parents will swoop in immediately, pick up the toddler, and comfort her in that moment of shock, before she even starts to crying).
- Bohn explains that this actually prevents the child from feeling secure. The child should experience that momentary confusion, the space to figure out what just happened, and then the time to grapple with the frustration of having fallen). Excessive parental involvement prevents children from having real experiences of decision making, failing, and cleaning up their own “messes”.
- Coping with adversity and solving the ordinary problems of life are the foundation builders for self-confidence and self-respect.
- If children do not experience adversity, they do not develop “psychological immunity” (Dan Kindlon-child psychologist). In the same way that our bodies immune system functions that it has to be exposed to pathogens in order to know how to respond to an attack. Children need exposure to discomfort, failure, and struggle in order to build confidence and resiliency.
- Ironically, parents have limited confidence in their children’s ability to solve their own problems and yet want them to demonstrate self-confidence.
- Recommendations in dealing with adversity and building confidence:
 1. Parents need to show confidence in their children and their abilities to deal with the world as it presents itself. Children benefit from knowing their parents believe they can make the necessary adjustments that arise from a child’s ordinary circumstances.
 2. Parents should cheer from the sidelines rather than to claim possession of their child’s success. When a child is successful in overcoming adversity, parents should continue to encourage independence in problem solving.
 3. Encourage your child to work just outside his or her comfort zone. Competence and accomplishment begets confidence. Self-esteem is a function of increased competence. Children seem to thrive when they are given tasks that they can successfully complete about 50 percent of the time.
 4. Do not allow the child to shift responsibility for difficulties to others. Confidence and competence are internal states. When you allow your child to deflect responsibility, you are encouraging the idea that someone other than the child is responsible both for the problem and for fixing it.
 5. Avoid the pitfalls of over-parenting. Parents should not interfere and do what a child can already perform. This eliminates the child’s opportunity to do something he is capable of doing.
 6. Parents should not do what is just outside the child’s comfort zone (i.e., zone of proximal learning-the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he can

do with help) because this is where children tend to push themselves. This would also deprive the child from learning from his direct experience.

7. Help a child break their goals down into smaller goals. Kids can become easily discouraged by early failures if goals are unrealistic.
8. Do not praise indiscriminately if you feel your child needs a “boost” in self-esteem. It will likely have the opposite effect (ex: young adults are experiencing a sense of disappointment when they realize that they are “less amazing/perfect” than their parents had always said they were). To be most effective, praise should be specific, and focused on effort, perseverance, and practice.

III. How to talk to your children as a means to increase self-esteem

- The story of Thomas- since he could walk, he has heard constantly that he is smart. His awareness of his intelligence has not translated into fearless confidence when attacking challenging schoolwork.
- Children are afraid to try things that they may not be successful at. When a child does not experience immediate success, they quickly give up and assume, “I am not good at this.”
- Children divide the world into two-things that they are naturally good at and things that they are not good at.
- For a few decades, it has been noted that a large percentage of all gifted students severely underestimate their own abilities. They underrate the importance of effort, and they overrate how much help they need from a parent.
- A growing body of research strongly suggests that giving children the label of “smart” might actually be causing children to underperform.
- Carol Dweck study on the effect of praise on students (experiment on 400 5th grade students): when we praise children for their intelligence only (“you must be smart at this), we imply that looking smart is the “name of the game”. We imply that the child should not risk making mistakes.
- Emphasizing effort (i.e., “you must have worked really hard”) gives a child a variable that they can control. The child comes to see themselves as in control of their success. Emphasizing natural intelligence takes it out of the child’s control, and it provides no positive recipe for responding to a failure. Being autonomous, having a child make decisions for themselves on their own, and feeling confident about their abilities provides a child with a sense of control which leads to happiness.
- We help our children cultivate healthy self-esteem when we encourage them to set meaningful goals and then to work toward the goals with effort and perseverance.
- The ability to repeatedly respond to failure by exerting more effort (as opposed to those who equate success and failure with innate ability) helps sustain motivation through long periods of delayed gratification.
- Individuals that exhibit persistence rebound well from disappointment and sustain motivation through extended periods of delayed gratification.
- Intermittent Reinforcement- The brain has to learn that frustrating situations can be worked through. Just like a child who receives too frequent rewards will not have persistence when the rewards disappear, a child will not have confidence if they are never exposed to disappointment or adversity.

IV. Jewish Perspectives on Self-Esteem

- How does one reconcile the strong emphasis that Jewish tradition puts on humility and modesty with the emphasis that psychology places on enhancing a child's self worth and importance?
- Rav Simcha Bunim- Every individual needs to have two pockets that should be dipped into as needed: One pocket should contain the phrase, "The world was created for my sake," and the other should have the words, "I am but dust and ashes."
- The ideal balance in achieving an appropriate self-image is attained when individuals are able to reach into the appropriate pocket depending on the demands of the situation.

V. Parental Role

- An accepting attitude that children receive from parents is a key building block of a healthy sense of self. A high level of self-esteem is likely when the reflected appraisals of others are positive.
- Despite competence, children who are raised in a home that is dominated by criticism, a punitive disciplinary style, or a failure to find a balance between love and limits are at risk for developing a poor self-concept.
- How a child defines success or failure, as well as his general attitude toward negative feedback can impact his sense of self. Parents also often have a "narrow" view of what success means.
- A child's self-concept is not a monolithic concept. The sum can be greater than each of its parts. How much relative importance the child assigns to a particular component of self-esteem will determine each child's overall self-image.
- One of the most influential contributors to self-esteem is a child's perception of what he is capable of doing. This is shaped by the expectations of others as well as the expectations he has of himself.
- We are always talking about what parents are not doing for their children (i.e., too critical or neglectful). A new challenge is that parents are not allowing their children to experience disappointment or failure. These experiences help build confidence and motivation.
- Clinical focus has always been on how the lack of parental attunement impacts child development. Perhaps some parents are too attuned. By protecting our children from unhappiness as children, we are depriving them of happiness as adults.
- Allowing a child to experience challenge and discomfort will make them more emotionally secure.
-

VI. Conclusion

- A child needs to feel normal anxiety and discomfort to strength their resiliency and confidence.
- Parents often confuse their own needs (insecurities) with their children's needs.
- Children who have their challenges solved for them, internalize the belief that they cannot solve problems on their own.
- We help a child develop a healthy sense of self when:
 - a. We set appropriate expectations and limits
 - b. Encourage them to push themselves
 - c. Make clear that we are accepting and nonjudgmental when they need guidance
 - d. Provide unconditional love