

TOP

Tips on parenting



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SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-RESPECT: FEELING GOOD IS NOT ENOUGH

by Jim Kestner

We all want our children to feel good about themselves. Spend some time in back alleys, jails, and prisons and you'll find ample evidence of what can happen to people who don't. As parents, we hunt self-esteem like buried treasure, hoping its discovery will bring our children lives rich in opportunity and fulfillment. I must challenge this wisdom, however conventional. The real trouble with pursuing self-esteem is that we spend too much time following treasure maps and too little time building character. I don't argue with those who assert the value of self-esteem. Rather, I contend there's more to the solution.

Self-esteem gained prominence in the 1960s. In 1967, for example, Stanley Coopersmith reported in *Antecedents of Self-Esteem* that children with higher self-esteem were better readers and had higher IQs. Today, he and a multitude of other researchers are recognized by the National Association for Self-Esteem. The work of these researchers and their impact on thousands, even millions, of children should not be underestimated.

However, as prudent parents we must proceed cautiously as we dig for hidden self-esteem. Hard evidence confronts us, proving that not everything that makes people feel good is really good for them. Too often, for example, parents hesitate to correct their children or point out when they make mistakes. Acting to protect self-esteem, we make the common mistake of thinking that we must do whatever it takes to keep our children in a constant state of joy.

In the name of building self-esteem, Dad decides not to make his son share a toy with a sibling or friend. Mom lets her daughter shout and throw food at a restaurant because she fears the harmful impact of repressing natural impulses. Unfortunately, these actions typically harm more than help. Children growing up in this environment lack the structure essential for developing the very confidence their parents set out to build. Talk to parents struggling to convince their teens to show responsibility, take their education seriously, keep a job, or stay out of trouble or even jail, and you will often hear tales of laissez-faire childhoods, devoid of punishment,

Acting to protect self-esteem, we make the common mistake of thinking that we must do whatever it takes to keep our children in a constant state of joy.



Self-Esteem and Self-Respect

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in which tantrums and shouts overturned parents' pleas of "no."

Indeed, the blind pursuit of good feeling can lead to many self-destructive behaviors later in life. Teens, for example, frequently use drugs and alcohol and engage in casual sex and other destructive behaviors to feel good by fitting in with their peers.

Self-esteem advocates point out that confidence and belief in one's own worth in early childhood will fight off depression and suicide in adolescence, and I certainly agree. I believe, however, that self-respect is much more valuable for guiding our parental words and deeds. Beyond feeling good, children's self-respect comes from feeling good about something they have accomplished. The *American Heritage Dictionary* definition includes the phrase "due respect." To earn respect, a person must first achieve something. So while self-esteem suggests a state of feeling good generally, not necessarily related to anything a child may have done, self-respect requires action.

To earn respect,
a person must first
achieve something.

Consider this example. Mom wants to build self-esteem in her six-year-old son, so she tells him that he's really smart. She tells him often, and he smiles and blushes at the compliment. One day, he makes a mistake counting money in front of some other boys his age and they laugh and call him names. Now he has to decide who is right, his mother or his peers. And since he knows that Mom is already biased toward him, we should not be surprised to find him assigning greater value to his peers' opinions, which he views as more objective. He doubts his abilities and loses respect for himself.

Now change the situation just a bit. Instead of focusing only on how her son feels, Mom focuses on actions to build self-respect. She goes beyond just telling her son that he is smart and instead points out the times that he has achieved something: learning to tie his shoes, writing his name and address, helping her remember a long grocery list. Now when peers laugh, he has more than just his mother's words to bolster him; he knows he has accomplished something. Regardless of what he encounters, this child has a foundation for resilience in the face of adversity.

In all fairness, I doubt that self-esteem experts mean to suggest the confidence they relate with self-esteem comes

solely from feeling good. The trouble is that as parents we tend not to think deeply about all the intricacies and subtleties of the term. Instead, we equate self-esteem with feeling good. And even teachers and coaches, whose actions impact millions of children every year, sometimes share our parent perspective. Just look at the incredible number of awards that children receive.

Why do some coaches and teachers give every child an award, regardless of what they have done? The child who fails to receive an award, they reason, will lose self-esteem. The trouble, of course, is that too often we underestimate our children's abilities to understand. When children see that they receive the same reward for hard work as for little or no work at all, the reward loses its ability to motivate. How much more confidence and resilience might we build by recognizing the actual accomplishments of each child? We should focus more time and energy upon providing our children with opportunities to achieve and less on providing empty awards.

Succinctly, my point is more than an exercise in semantics. Feelings come and go, but deeds accomplished bolster confidence and stand as a shield against failure and criticism. The more we accomplish, the more we believe we can accomplish. Do we want our children's view of self determined mostly by how they have felt and good things people have said, or do we want them building a solid foundation through a series of accomplishments?

The importance of the issue comes ultimately in our compulsion to act. Do not chase self-esteem by giving empty compliments or sheltering your children from their mistakes. Instead, explain that mistakes are a natural, valuable part of learning. Teach your children self-respect by recognizing and celebrating their achievements, small and great. Then, when they find themselves alone in a sea of mistakes, buffeted by waves of criticism, they sail in command of ships made stout with beams of personal achievement, their faces turned confidently toward future success.

~Jim Kestner is a character-development specialist who coordinates alternative teacher certification at Eastern Illinois University and speaks nationally to parents, educators, and youth.

Book Review

True Stories, Real Lives, Compelling Stories: Biographies for Children

by Sylvia Read

Some biographies for children try to tell the story of a person's entire life, some only try to tell about an important event in that person's life. But the lives of people are great stories and, at the same time, true. They can give children glimpses of the possibilities that their lives hold for them, helping them to dream and plan for their futures.

"In the Koran, the first thing God said to Muhammad was 'Read.'" –Alia Muhammad Baker, from *The New York Times*, July 27, 2003. This is the opening epigraph of *The Librarian of Basra, A True Story from Iraq* written and illustrated by Jeanette Winter. Alia Muhammad Baker is the librarian of Basra. She was worried about the war coming to Basra, took it upon herself to save as many books as she could when the government wouldn't allow her to move the books to a safe place. Some of the books she took to her own home and some were hidden in a restaurant next door to the library. The library did indeed burn to the ground, after which Alia and the restaurant owner moved all 30,000



books from the restaurant to Alia's home and the homes of her friends. Alia still dreams of rebuilding the library, but in the meantime, the books are safe. Proceeds from the sale of this book go to a special fund to rebuild the library of Basra. It's also available from your local library. What would you do if it burned down?

Whether or not you care about baseball, *Hank Aaron: Brave in Every Way* will touch your heart. Before African Americans were even allowed to play in the major leagues, young Hank Aaron wanted to be a major-league ballplayer. Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier and Hank's dream became possible. After playing in a local league and a professional team called the Indianapolis Clowns, Hank joined the Braves, where he quickly established himself as a leading home run hitter. Eventually, he saw that he might surpass Babe Ruth's home-run record. As he got closer to breaking the record, hate mail flooded in, but Hank was only more determined to break the record. In 1974, during a home game between the Braves and the Dodgers, Hank hit his 715th home run, breaking



the record. As he rounded the bases, his mother worried that someone might try to carry through on a death threat. But no one did. Hank got a big hug from his mother and later thanked God for pulling him through.

Who doesn't find magicians fascinating? Beginning with his birth in 1874 and ending with his death caused by a ruptured appendix in 1926, *Houdini: World's Greatest Mystery Man and Escape King* tells Houdini's life story through a traditional narrative of his life and descriptions of his most famous acts. Houdini never told his secrets, but some of his tricks are explained, which, though it may make his acts less mysterious, doesn't make them any less extraordinary!

The book includes a bibliography of sources the author used when writing the book, which makes this book excellent for showing even young children how authors document where their information came from. The illustrations are gorgeous realistic oil paintings.



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Book Review

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If you had to come up with a list of important American women, the eleven women profiled in *Sisters in Strength: American Women Who Made a Difference* would certainly be on it. The author writes of women who exemplify leadership, humanitarianism, dignity, and creativity: Pocahontas, Harriet Tubman, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony (profiled together), Clara Barton, Emily Dickinson, Mary Cassatt, Helen Keller, Eleanor Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, and Margaret Mead. Each one takes only five minutes to read aloud, which allows for plenty of discussion along the way. They are well-researched, not the idealized fantasies that are sometimes propagated (think Disney's Pocahontas). The illustrations are either primitive and child-like, or appealing and accessible, depending on your taste in illustration style. An extensive timeline and bibliography are provided, which makes the book useful to teaching about the conventions of historical writing.



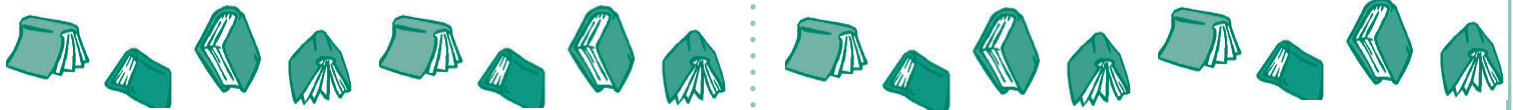
Whether you seek out these particular books or check out the juvenile biographies with your child at your local library,

biography is a wonderful genre to explore. They are intriguing stories, yet factual. Biographies make history, both past and present, live, breathe, and speak.

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~Sylvia Read is a former 1st and 2nd grade teacher who now teaches language arts and children's literature classes to preservice and inservice teachers at Utah State University.



activity

corner



Play Dough Recipe

Materials:

- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup salt
- 1 tablespoon cream of tartar
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups water

Directions:

Mix together flour, salt, and cream of tartar. In a different bowl, mix oil and water. Add your choice of food coloring. Combine the wet and dry ingredients in a pot. Stir. Cook over low heat, stirring constantly, until it looks like thick mashed potatoes. Cool and store in an airtight container.



DOWNTIME AND YOUR BABY'S BRAIN

by Kathy Kalmar, Ph.D.

Lately, there has been a great deal of information about children's developing brains written in magazines for parents. Adults caring for and teaching babies have been advised to take advantage of the window of opportunity available during the early years of a child's life to stimulate their developing brain and central nervous system (Sousa, 2001). As a result, more parents and teachers talking to infants, taking them on outings, and purchasing stimulating toys for them. This is to their credit. This is what good caregivers do. Sometimes, however, there can be too much of a good thing; too much stimulation.

Life in the Fast Lane

The twentieth century American world is on a fast track. It's so fast that fast food seems slow in comparison to the multi-tasking that involves and engages adults, children and families. Even the cars and minivans contain video players both to keep children busy and perhaps stimulated as parents rush to the next function.

It's time to slow down and slow the children down as well. While the umbrella stroller makes it easy and convenient to take the baby just about anywhere, at some point infants just crash. This can happen in several ways. One way is a melt down wherein the baby collapses in a fit of sobbing and crying. Another way is to fall asleep from the exhaustive and stimulating day.

Engaging Your Baby

Talking to your baby and playing with her is well and good particularly when you provide a running narrative account labeling and explaining what is going on in your child's world. This is very beneficial for the young child's developing brain. The simple fact is the baby's brain is not fully developed at birth. It is still growing and developing after birth. In

fact, there is a "soft spot" on your baby's head to accommodate further future growth. This is why teachers encourage talking, playing, and listening to a variety of music with your baby. No one argues the need for children and parents to connect frequently in an intimate and personal way to promote optimum emotional, social, and intellectual growth, stimulation, language, and physical development; but there is one crucial brain-friendly element that seems to have been forgotten in these sincere efforts to support the young brain. This brain-friendly factor is down time.

There comes the time when even good things must end. The baby does occasionally need a break, a breather. That's what this article is all about: when is there too much stimulation? When does your baby need a break? Fortunately, there is an easy answer to this. Take a break before the baby becomes overwhelmed, cranky or tired. It's possible to be able to read the signs when your baby has had enough. Some babies fuss, some withdraw, some look away, some squirm and push, others protest with a howl. Whenever any of these signs occur, give your baby a break. She's had enough stimulating activities. It's time for some down time.

Down time does not mean putting the baby to bed. It means reducing the stimulation in the baby's life. It's a quiet, peaceful, just kind of "hanging out" time. While it can lead to a nap, it is not to be confused with placing the baby in the bassinet or crib. It means taking a break from the stimulating interaction with people and things.

Infant Toys

A walk through any baby or children's toy department is an education in itself. Thirty years ago, there were rattles, stuffed animals and mobiles. There were no exersaucers that allowed the babies to

stand with the support of the device that is a stationary "walker"-type "saucer" so that babies may view their world in an upright position. Nor were there rattle-type toys placed in front of the baby on the rim of this saucer added to grab the baby's attention. These features transformed that upright saucer into a mega exersaucer. It's manufacturer, Evenflo, calls it a learning center with your baby literally in the center of it surrounded with stimulating objects. After that, wonderful small motor thingamabobs were added that the baby could move on or off, up or down. Before long, in an effort to continue stimulating the baby, things that chimed, whistled and played music were added. Now there are talking toys, touch and play books, musical toys, and other gadgets that stimulate the ear, eye, hand and foot. There are kick toys that play music when the baby's foot kicks it and push and pull toys that turn, twirl, whiz, bang and alakazam too! Even cuddly stuffed toys have a recorded message or sound when squeezed. However good these things are, there is one crucial brain-friendly element that seems to have been forgotten in these sincere efforts to nourish the young brain. That is the need for down time.

The Low Down on Down Time

Down time for the brain is a well-documented, legitimate factor for healthy brain growth and development (Jensen, 1998). The brain needs to recharge itself. It needs a period of uninterrupted calm. It needs down time, a time in which nothing much occurs, a time older children and teens call "hanging out" or "chilling." Down time means there's nothing stimulating happening; no television in the background, no radio or compact disk playing. Down time is simply a mellow time wherein everyone just is and has their being. There is a break from the frenetic pace of the day. The baby is simply in the house perhaps resting, lying

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Down Time and Your Baby's Brain

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down, sitting, or propped in the infant seat; but she is not actively engaged in anything.

Latest Brain Research

The brain research for which Eric Jensen (1998) is well known stresses that the brain shifts its focus on high and low cycles for maximum efficiency. There is actually a basic rest-activity cycle occurring in the healthy brain. Jensen recommends daily rest periods or quiet times that last 20 minutes several times a day. The brain needs down time to process all that it encounters. Processing takes time. The information taken in by the babies needs to get into the memory processing center and this takes down time.

Adults need to provide personal processing time after babies have had play time. This gives the baby time to process the new material and integrate it with what he already knows. In order to create new meaning, the baby needs freedom from the things we do, time away from engagement. There are chemicals that are exchanged in the brain during periods of rest and activity. Rest time or down time allows the protein to be processed along with other neurotransmitters that are crucial for long term learning to take place. Moreover, the synapses in the brain strengthen when the neurons are given time to solidify. The good news is that there are healthy learning benefits to just doing nothing but processing information several times a day. It's a legitimate activity for parents, teachers and children alike. No one's brain works well if it does not get the opportunity to process the information it receives. Seldom do we hear that taking a break is also learning and is actually a recommended practice. Before rushing off to the next stimulating event, take a deep breath and remember to take a break. The baby needs one and so do you.

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~Kathy Kalmar, Ph.D., Saginaw Valley State University, has taught since 1974. She is a mother of 37 years, is now a grandmother of 16 months. She



question corner features questions posed by parents to early childhood experts who provide brief responses in this newsletter. If you have any questions you would like answered, please send e-mail to eejcenter@cc.usu.edu or mail to EEJ Center for Early Childhood Education, Utah State University, 6705 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322-6705.

question corner



"My first child is going to school this year. Are there questions I should ask the teacher to learn more about this new experience?"

--John in Minnesota

Ask for a handbook with information on the schools policies and procedures including:

- The time the school day ends and begins.
- The earliest time children can arrive at school.
- Notifications of absences and illnesses by school and by parent.
- Permission for riding a bike to school.
- Availability of before and after school activities.
- Yearly schedule.
- Emergency procedures.
- Busing as well as drop off and pickup policies.

Make an appointment with the teacher to:

- Introduce yourself and discuss information about your family that will help the teacher understand your child's needs.
- Set up a way to communicate with the teacher on a regular basis (e.g., in-person, notes, phone, e-mail, website).
- Ask about the amount of homework to expect and how you will be informed about your child's progress.
- Determine when tests will be given and how the results will be used.
- Ask what the child will be expected to learn.
- Inquire about how you can help your child and the teacher.

Sign up to be a volunteer!

- Work with the children in the classroom or on field trips.
- Participate in school functions.
- Provide or create needed resources.
- Become a member of your local Parent Teacher Association (PTA). For more information on the National PTA check out their website at <http://www.pta.org>



Find out how the school makes site-based decisions.

- Is there a committee or team?
- Who serves on the committee/team?
- When does it meet?
- How can parents participate in the decision making process?

~Heidi Malloy, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Metropolitan State University.

by Rebecca Monhardt

Science is something that all people do, not only something done by scientists. In our everyday lives, we approach problems in systematic ways even if we don't actually think of this as "doing science." As adults, many of us can remember being taught that scientists use a specific, step-by-step method to do their research. Do you recall something called the scientific method? More recent thinking on this topic indicates that there are many ways that scientists approach problems and there are multiple scientific methods, not just that rigid procedure many of us committed to memory.

Rather than limiting students by teaching a somewhat outdated cookbook method for doing science, perhaps it would be more useful to focus on the skills necessary in doing science. Certain processes have been identified that are common to most forms of inquiry. These procedures are called the science process skills and include such basic skills as observation, classification, communication, measurement, estimation, prediction, and inference. Practicing scientists use these skills in their work to solve problems and conduct research. These skills transfer to subjects other than science and are skills we use in our everyday lives.

Not every child will grow up wanting to be a scientist and I'm not so sure I believe the articles that give parents advice on "how to raise a scientist." However, teaching the skills of scientists will help all children learn to think and solve their own problems. You can think of science process skills as learning how to think.

OBSERVATION AND INFERENCE

Making observations is the most basic of all the process skills and is the primary way that children gain information about the world. Observation involves using all of the senses to gain information about objects and happenings. Making inferences is another one of the basic process skills. Inferences use observations to propose possible explanations for events that have occurred. When children come home from school, they may notice the smell of freshly baked sugar cookies. This is an observation. From this, children may either infer that someone has just baked a batch of cookies or perhaps that someone has lit a scented candle whose fragrance is "sugar cookie." Previous experience will influence which inference the child makes.

Children often need guidance in making inferences. As a classroom teacher, I often had a student report to me that another student had taken his pencil. When I asked him why he believed this to be true, his evidence was that the guilty party had a pencil that looked just like his—a yellow one with a number two on it!

As young children begin to make inferences, parents can provide guidance in helping them develop this skill

by asking simple questions. Possible questions for young children might include: How do you know? Why do you think so? Questions for older elementary children can seek more specific detail and require higher level thinking: What evidence supports your idea? Do you think this evidence is reliable? Are there any other possible explanations?

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND INFERENCE

For young children, there are several picture books that can help students make inferences. In *Who Is the Beast?*, children must first carefully observe what they notice in the illustrations and the clues in the text to infer who the beast is. The ending will challenge most children's inferences. In the book, *Snow: Who's Been Here?* is a story that children can relate to especially during the winter months. The characters in this picture book hike through the snow and examine signs of animal life that are everywhere. Children can help the characters find the clues and infer who has left the clues. A description of all the animals in the book at the end also provides interesting science content for children.

ANIMAL TRACKS AND INFERENCE

Studying animals tracks is a way for older children to make inferences and also learn about the animal who made the tracks. The animal that made the track is no longer there, but it has left a clue that can provide a great deal of information about the animal. Track identification books can help children figure out which animal left the track, and observing the pattern of the tracks can suggest what the animal might have been doing. In winter, snow provides great surface for studying tracks. Each morning after a new snowfall, I enjoy looking at the tracks in my yard to determine which neighborhood dogs paid me a visit and whether any deer passed through on their way to somewhere else. Children can also create their own "track puzzles" in newly fallen snow. They can imagine a story they'd like to tell and then create footprints in the snow that illustrate the story. Other children or even parents can examine the clues and try to figure out the story. *Tracks in the Wild* is a wonderful picture book about animals tracks. It's a great book for the whole family to read before and after a nature walk in the snow. For those who prefer to stay inside, this book can engage the whole family in creative thinking, making inferences, and learning about animals.



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