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Self-esteem and your child

PARENTING CONFERENCE: The foundation blocks are anchored in the child's first two years

Posted By CHERYL CLOCK, STANDARD STAFF

Posted 1 day ago

The building blocks of self-esteem are put in place early.

A child's sense of self-worth is built block by block, over time. If the foundation is sturdy, it will last a lifetime. It will withstand the harsh blows that life often brings. It won't easily come tumbling down.

The first foundation blocks are anchored in the child's first two years, says Tony Volk, assistant professor in the department of child and youth studies at Brock University.

It begins with bonds of attachment between infant and

parent. Strong attachments help babies develop a positive outlook on the world. Picking up babies when they cry. Attending to their needs. Holding them.

"If they're more secure in their world, they're more secure about themselves," says Volk.

Children with a low self-image are at greater risk for issues such as: physical and mental health problems; high or low body weights; delinquency; and depression and anxiety.

During the Niagara Parenting Conference on May 23, Volk will be hosting a workshop for parents on promoting self-esteem in children.

This year's conference theme is Growing with our Tweens and Teens: Strategies for Parenting Today's Youth.

Keynote speaker is Karyn Gordon, a parent/teen coach, motivational speaker and resident therapist on The Mom Show on Slice Network. Also speaking in the morning is NRP Det. Const. Nadine Wallace. She will help parents understand facts about Internet safety and awareness.

The conference is run by a group of volunteers from organizations including Brock University's department of child and youth studies, Niagara Region Public Health, the Niagara Health System and the Ontario Early Years Centres.

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(May 16-18) includes golf, cart, range, tees, deluxe BBQ lunch with a drink.

In the afternoon, parents can sign up for one of five different workshops that touch on topics including substance abuse, youth and disabilities, healthy body image and talking about sex.

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In his workshop, Volk will share strategies for promoting a healthy self-identity, starting right from the early years.

When a baby is about 18 months old, he is much more aware of himself as an individual, says Volk.

"They are their own person in the world," he says.

They begin to understand they have their own wishes, needs and desires. They exert their independence and push boundaries.

If a parent responds to their child's attempts at autonomy in a reasonable, nurturing way, their self-esteem will grow. If a parent is over-controlling, a child may become shy. They might have trouble interacting with other children and be more clingy, he says.

At about age four, children learn that people think differently than them.

Here's an example. A three-year-old observes two adults in a room. One adult places an object on their desk. But when the other adult leaves the room for a moment, the first adult moves the object to another location.

The three-year-old observes the object placed in the new spot.

When the adult returns to the room, the child assumes that because they know where the object is now, the adult does as well.

Here's how self-esteem fits into the picture. By the time that child turns four, he will likely understand that people can have different thoughts than his. And other people's evaluations of him begin to have importance.

This realization accelerates when a child starts school. They catch on quickly that school is a place where they are compared. Are they good academically? Socially? At sports?

A parent needs to be realistic. Don't continue to falsely applaud the child's skills in hopes of boosting self-esteem. If a child isn't good at basketball, he knows it. A child eventually won't listen to a parent who keeps insisting otherwise.

So, be honest, says Volk. Address their weaknesses. And promote their strengths.

If it's an important skill, get some help for your child.

If it's not important, help your child understand that it's OK not to be good at everything. Point out what skills really matter in life, and which ones don't. And be sure to emphasize the skills they do well at.

If they're not good at basketball, remind them how well they play soccer.

It's a tough skill for younger children.

"Focusing on what a child is good at provides a refuge they can fall back on," he says. But be careful not to coddle. Children also need to learn how to accept failure. While it may run contrary to a parent's desire to protect their children, letting them fail at the minor events of life will actually promote self-esteem in the long run, says Volk.

Why? "Life will involve failure," he says. "Once they leave home, they're going to have to deal with success and failure.

"If you don't teach a child how to deal with failure, you leave them vulnerable to dangerous blows to self-esteem."

Children need to learn not to be defeated by a failure. To survive with their self-esteem intact.

Let children try many different activities. If they're good at it, they discover success. If they're not, they've just learned an important lesson about failure when the stakes aren't so high, he says.

"Be the scaffolding for the child," says Volk.

Reinforce their strengths. Share stories of your weaknesses, your failures. It will actually make a parent seem more real in the eyes of their children, he says. Talk about how you felt and what you learned from your disappointments.

And consider this. A parent who is unrealistically positive, who overinflates a child's self-esteem, isn't helping them either. Over time, the child will start to believe a false version of their abilities. They become narcissistic. They won't listen to advice that could actually help them. They will be immune to constructive criticism.

If they fail, they're more likely to blame the people around them.

They might say, "It wasn't me who did bad on the test, the test was unfair," says Volk.

Or, it's not me who can't work with other people, it's actually their problem.

Parents also need to be the gatekeepers of their children's friends, says Volk. Friends can impact a child's self-esteem.

Teach children when they're young how to recognize a good friend. How do friends treat each other? What does it mean to be a friend to another person?

Peers often can impact self-esteem in ways parents can't. If a friend says "you look cool," it likely means more than a parent saying the same, he says.

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And if your child is called stupid, a good friend can offer a reassuring "don't listen to them," with more impact than a parent.

Even through the teen years, parents should continue to monitor friendships. Keep talking about what makes a healthy friendship.

Just be sure to start talking about friends when kids are young. It's likely they will choose the same type of friends when they get older.

"If they didn't play with troublemakers when they were younger, they probably won't when they're older," says Volk.

"If they've been talking to their parents about how to be a good friend for the last 10 years, it doesn't just suddenly stop."

Children who have high self-esteem and a close relationship with their parents are less susceptible to peer pressure, too, he says.

For more information on esteem and children, visit www.medem.com and search "signs of low self-esteem" or the Canadian Mental Health Association at www.cmha.ca, click on your mental health, children's mental health, children and self-esteem.

Boosting your child's self-esteem

Here are some tips from Tony Volk, assistant professor of child and youth studies at Brock University, to help parents boost their children's self-esteem.

1. Unconditional love. Love that doesn't depend on success or failure.
2. Security. A place where the child can always safely retreat to.
3. Promote skills. Competence develops confidence.
4. Promote variety to find a child's strengths.
5. Promote positive friends to form additional healthy, caring relationships.

Afternoon workshops

Participants can choose to attend one of the following afternoon workshops at the Niagara Parenting Conference:

1. "Substance Abuse Awareness and Prevention," with Donna Markarian

Donna Markarian, public health nurse, will lead an interactive workshop to learn more about the drugs that youth are using, what youth are saying about drugs and the reasons for using drugs, how to tell if your child is using drugs and what you can do to help your child, how to talk to your child about alcohol/drugs, substance abuse prevention, and what community resources are available.

2. "Advocacy for Youth With Disabilities," with Dawne Mach

Dawne Mach, executive director for the Learning Disabilities Association of Niagara, will lead an interactive workshop to learn more about the Learning Disabilities Association of Niagara, the nature of learning disabilities, and how to effectively advocate for your child with special learning challenges.

3. "Loving The Body You Have: Parents, Youth and Healthy Bodies," with Dr. Kathy Skott-Myhre

For parents and young people, maintaining a powerful and dynamic sense of their bodies is an ongoing challenge in our media-driven consumer culture. For both psychological and physical health, it is important that young people and their parents find ways to think about their bodies and relationships as a source of personal pride and pleasure. This presentation will focus on recent research in the area of positive body image and practice. Skott-Myhre has worked extensively with young people in the areas of body image and eating disorders.

4. "Let's Talk Sex Talk," with Chris Watling

Chris Watling, public health nurse with experience with adult family and teens, will lead an interactive workshop that discusses sexuality. Participants will explore gender identity and feelings, including those of attraction, and the way we are intimate with others. Participants will connect body image with sexual behaviour. Cultural beliefs, attitudes and behaviours will be explored and will allow a discussion on acceptable and unacceptable sexual experiences. Helpful ideas of techniques parents can use to "talk sex talk" will be shared. This is a workshop where we all can learn together, says Watling.

5. "Promoting Self-Esteem in Your Kids: What Parents Can Do!" with Dr. Tony Volk

A child's identity is a vital part of his or her well-being, and is the foundation of how that child deals with the world. This seminar will focus on how children develop self-identity and self-esteem, and how parents and family members can help to promote healthy and positive self-identity. Participants will start at the early years and follow identity development through the teens so that parents can understand both how their child's identity has developed and how it will develop. Research and advice will be presented in a down-to-earth fashion that encourages parent and family participation.

WHAT: Niagara Parenting Conference 2009, organized by Niagara Region Public Health, the Niagara Health System, the Ontario Early Years Centres, and the department of child and youth studies at Brock University. Christine Tardif-Williams, associate professor of child and youth studies, is chairperson of the conference.

WHERE: Ridley College

WHEN: Saturday, May 23. Registration from 8-9 a. m.; Keynote speaker Karyn Gordon at 9 a. m.; Internet safety at 11 a. m.; and afternoon workshops from 1-3 p. m.

TICKETS: \$25/single, \$40/couple. TO REGISTER: Pre-registration is encouraged and is on a first-come, first-served basis. For more information or to register, call 905-688-5550, ext. 4070. Or you can mail your registration form with cheque to: Niagara Parenting Conference, Department of Child and Youth Studies, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, L2S 3A1.

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