



# Self-Esteem in Parents and Children

Child-rearing is a stressful experience, especially in modern society with its fragmented values, dual parent employment, divorce, and loss of extended family support. Parents of teenagers may experience the greatest stress of all. They are faced with the difficult task of guiding young people who are in the midst of a dramatic, and sometimes turbulent, transition from childhood to young adulthood. With the onset of puberty come the dangers associated with sexuality and pregnancy, substance abuse, and automobile use — issues that heighten parents' apprehension and may increase conflict with their teenagers. Continued stress and frustration can wear parents down, diminishing their sense of self-worth and creating tension between spouses.

Parent self-esteem is important for two reasons: First, we act consistently with our beliefs and feelings about ourselves. If a person believes something is true, that belief affects his or her actions just as though it were actually true. A parent who believes he is inadequate will fail to take positive action. A parent who believes she is weak and powerless may respond by over-controlling her teenage children.

Second, our perceptions of the world around us are affected by our self-esteem. Our beliefs about ourselves, our children, and our relationships can act as a spotlight that draws our attention to events that confirm those beliefs. Parents who believe they are failures will notice their mistakes more than their successes. Those who believe they are unloved may notice every little rejection and overlook expressions of affection by their children.

Our beliefs about others also serve as a screen or filter that can distort our observations. Parents who believe they are stupid may attribute their successes to good luck, fate, or the intervention of another person. A parent who believes her daughter uses drugs may interpret any suspicious behavior as a confirmation of drug use. Parents who are insecure with their own self-image may "under-react" by withdrawing or "over-react" by dominating. Their insecurity prevents them from making an accurate assessment of the situation and choosing a reasonable response to solving the problem. Both extremes—domination and withdrawal—are ineffective and damaging to self-esteem.

This publication outlines the developmental tasks related to self-esteem that face young children, grade schoolers and adolescents, as well as the special pressures parents may face with each of these age groups. Key issues underlying parents' self-esteem also will be summarized. The charts that follow summarize the key concepts that relate to parent self-esteem. This approach to self-esteem is based on the four key concepts identified in *I'm Positive: Growing Up With Self-Esteem*:

I am a **Person**.

I am a **Dreamer**.

I am a **Champion**.

I am a **Friend**.

Copies of *I'm Positive: Growing Up With Self-Esteem (S-31)* are available from county extension offices or from:

Extension Distribution  
16 Umberger Hall  
Kansas State University  
Manhattan, KS 66506

The price is \$1.60.

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# Self-esteem tasks for children

	<b>Early childhood: Ages birth—6</b>	<b>Middle childhood: Ages 7—12</b>	<b>Adolescence: Ages 13—18</b>
<b>Person</b>	Gains familiarity with the objective, observable, physical dimensions of self. Differentiates self from others. Begins to form opinions about the self. Recognizes whether he or she is special to parents.	Expands the physical/behavioral concept of self to include psychological or personality characteristics. Compares self with others and evaluates self in terms of others' impressions. Shift in focus from family to friends in defining the self.	Adjusts to dramatic physical changes. Establishes independence from family and peers. Experiments with different identity forms. Comes to terms with his or her individuality. More aware of strengths and weaknesses.
<b>Dreamer</b>	Works toward immediate goals (building a tower of blocks, making a painting). Develops imagination—the ability to envision possibilities. Develops a positive or negative attitude toward a general, non-specific future. (Tells mother, “When I grow up I’m going to marry you!”)	Begins to have a clearer picture of possible life goals. Likely to respond to “What do you think you want to be when you grow up?” Learns to work toward short-range goals (e.g., school projects). Becomes more aware of his or her talents; acquires hobbies.	Life goals become more important. May feel insecure about the future at times. Forms a clearer picture of realistic occupational choices. Seeks a match between interests and strengths and career alternatives.
<b>Champion</b>	Takes pride in making things happen rather than creating products (loves painting, building, and running more than the end results). Discovers what the body is capable of. Perseveres in moderately difficult tasks. Resists physical assault by peers; protects property. Occasionally resists demands of parents.	Competition may have a significant effect on self-worth. Takes pride in accomplishments. Learns strategies for resisting psychological assault. Acceptance by peers nurtures sense of competence. Emulates attractive same-sex role model. Uses power to cooperate with and help others.	Integrates strong feelings about right and wrong into an ethical framework. Perseveres toward important goals despite ridicule or doubt. Will not be distracted by others' self-destructive behavior. Capable of negotiating conflict.
<b>Friend</b>	Learns skills for social interaction with peers. Gives and receives physical affection in relationships with parents and special friends. Begins to form a conscience. Responds to others' distress in a positive manner. Shows tenderness toward pets, assumes some responsibility for their care.	Forms closer, more enduring friendships. Has a “best friend.” Learns the give and take necessary for lasting friendships. Participates in a peer culture. Conscience becomes a significant part of the personality.	Can understand and respond to psychological distress. Provides psychological support to peers experiencing distress. Frames problems from another person's viewpoint. Relates successfully to the opposite sex.

*Note: Ages are approximate. Adolescence may be considered to begin at onset of puberty.*

# Developmental pressures on parents' self-esteem

## Early childhood

## Middle childhood

## Adolescence

<p>Concern about their children's vulnerability.</p> <p>Conflict between their personal goals (career and leisure time) and their children's needs.</p> <p>Conflict with their parents and in-laws about child-rearing.</p> <p>Constant demands for making adjustments in their expectations as their children grow and change.</p> <p>Marital strain because of new child-rearing demands.</p> <p>Greater psychological fatigue from constant demands on time and attention from dependent young children.</p> <p>Greater physical fatigue because of the work required for child care.</p> <p>Conflict with children who are egocentric and selfish.</p> <p>Changes in self-image from the child of one's parents to the parent of one's children.</p>	<p>Apprehension over erosion of influence and gradual loss of control to their children's peer group.</p> <p>Concern about their children's school performance and study habits.</p> <p>Additional time demands from children's increased participation in school and community activities.</p> <p>Difficulty in recognizing and accepting their children's true limitations; adjusting their own aspirations while coming to terms with their children's capabilities.</p> <p>Concern about their children's feelings of inadequacy, inferiority.</p> <p>Apprehension about children's greater independence and loss of parental control; no longer able to protect and guide them. Increased mobility and time spent away from home means greater exposure to outside threats.</p>	<p>Conflict between their values and beliefs and those of their children. Dramatic changes in young people's intellectual development make differences of opinion and conflict more likely.</p> <p>Coping with strong emotions and tensions associated with adolescent insecurity and self-consciousness.</p> <p>Pressure from increasing financial demands.</p> <p>Rejection by children as they prepare to leave the security of their parents' home for life on their own.</p> <p>Difficulty in helping children make positive career choices.</p>
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## Parent self-esteem

<p><b>Person</b></p>	<p><b><i>You are a person in your own right.</i></b> Separate your sense of self from that of your children. Regardless of our devotion and attachment to our children, we are still unique individuals with our own needs. Keeping our sense of self separate from our children is not rejection, abandonment, or neglect. If we grant ourselves the right to be individuals we can also give our children the freedom to define themselves—to dream their own dreams and fight their own battles. We have a life outside of being a parent, with our own friendships and interests.</p> <p>Self-acceptance promotes self-respect. Remember that you are only human, and learn from your mistakes. To paraphrase Dorothy Briggs, “Look forward, to your stars, not backward, to your scars.” We do not have to define ourselves by our children’s successes and failures, either. We need to view ourselves as good people regardless of the choices our children make.</p>
<p><b>Dreamer</b></p>	<p><b><i>Nurture your own dreams as well as your children’s.</i></b> What do you hope to accomplish with your life? Focus on some personally satisfying activity that gives you a feeling of accomplishment. Setting personal goals nurtures hope and a positive view of the future.</p> <p>Be reasonable in your expectations for yourself as well as for your children. Unreasonable expectations and irrational distortions lead to failure, aggravate stress and diminish self-esteem. Avoid the role of the all-knowing, all-powerful, “always right” parent. Re-examine your attitude toward time: take a long-term view of your own life and your children’s.</p>
<p><b>Champion</b></p>	<p><b><i>Live up to your convictions.</i></b> Do not feel swept along by shifting social values, personal fatigue, time pressures and harassment from children or other relatives. Define what is important for you and your children and use those convictions to guide your actions. Parents are not helpless: We have the power to make choices about how to raise our children. We may be challenged to rise above the hurtful child-rearing we experienced as children, and make our own choices. If we were spanked by our parents we are not destined to spank our children. If we heard hurtful words we are not destined to repeat them to our children. We can define for ourselves the kind of parents we want to be.</p>
<p><b>Friend</b></p>	<p><b><i>Make a conscious choice to love and nurture your children.</i></b> Being a parent can stretch and deepen all of our emotions—joy, love, anger, fear, sadness. The struggle of protecting and nurturing another human life can deepen our humanity and compassion.</p> <p>To love and nurture our children we must also love and nurture ourselves. When there is a conflict, who comes first? When a crisis occurs with our children, we may drop everything, forgetting ourselves and providing immediate, unconditional support by giving our time and resources to restore our children’s well-being. Never lose sight, though, of your own need for support and affection. Find linkages with other caring adults who can meet these emotional needs.</p>

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