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Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 14

Self-Esteem and Children's Learning Problems

By Danielle Tracey, Psychologist

When a child's academic performance falters or behaviour becomes a concern, parents and professionals can expend an enormous amount of energy on helping these two areas. Unfortunately an area of equal importance, self-esteem, is often neglected.

A child's self-esteem can have a significant influence on their life. If we are to truly help a child struggling to learn, we need to pursue the goal of maximising self-esteem with the same fervour as literacy or other problems.

What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is quite simply the way we feel about ourselves. Having good self-esteem means that we feel we are a worthwhile and special person.

Self-esteem is determined by how we evaluate our capabilities and reflects our feelings of being accepted and valued by others. For children experiencing difficulty with learning, developing a positive self-esteem is arduous, as they tend to experience failure and negative feedback from others more than other children do.

Why is it important to have a positive self-esteem?

Having poor self-esteem can be more debilitating than having a learning difficulty.

How a person views and values him or herself can have a significant impact on almost everything they do including their career, relationships, mental well-being and happiness.

Research has shown that children who have good self-esteem:

- are usually healthier,
- have better interpersonal relationships,
- are bothered less by worries and stress and are not so often depressed,
- manage problems better,
- try new things without too much fear of failing,
- are more motivated, and
- have less behaviour problems.

Positive self-esteem can also have a marked effect upon a child's academic performance by increasing their motivation, ability to focus and willingness to take risks.

How does a child's self-esteem develop over time?

Self-esteem develops overtime starting from birth.

The self-esteem of young children is generally positive and the children may overestimate their capabilities. For example, ask a four-year-old if they are good at running and most will immediately exclaim 'yes!' as well as demonstrate their talent to you.

The self-esteem of a young child will be global in nature and they may say that 'I am a good boy or girl'. The self-esteem of younger children is based largely on the feedback from others, especially parents, about their goodness and worth.

As a child grows and they are better able to integrate feedback and experiences from their environment, self-esteem becomes closer to their actual performance or reality.

Overtime a child's self-esteem also becomes more differentiated. For example, an eight-year-old child may be able to explain 'I am good at maths, but not very good at reading'.

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Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.

Learning Links

Head Office

12-14 Pindari Road
Peakhurst NSW 2210
Tel: 9534 1710 Fax: 9584 2054
Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au
Website: www.learninglinks.org.au

Enquiries regarding this Information Sheet should be directed to Robyn Collins
Tel: (02) 9534 1710 Fax: (02) 9584 2054 Email: rcollins@learninglinks.org.au

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At approximately 7 years of age (and possibly even younger) children are able to compare their skills and abilities with others around them such as classmates. Once this happens, their perceived abilities or weaknesses compared to similar aged children or siblings become an important contributing factor to their self-esteem.

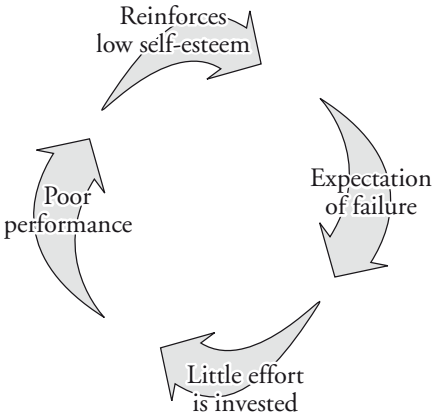
Schooling and a child's self-esteem

The self-esteem of many children is threatened when they start school and have to cope in an unfamiliar situation with lots of other new children and new rules to learn. Problems such as having trouble with schoolwork, being bullied or not having any friends can adversely affect self-esteem.

As children progress through school, self-esteem wanes.

During preschool and the early primary years, children are typically confident as evidenced by their curiosity and eagerness to learn. As they move into higher grades, they become increasingly aware of how their performance compares with that of their peers and more realistic about their capabilities.

Once a child has low self-esteem, it can be very difficult to reverse their feeling of worthlessness and they enter a cycle that perpetuates and enhances their negative feelings.



How can parents promote positive self-esteem in their children?

For many parents a primary goal in raising their children is instilling in them a sense of value and encouraging them to feel good about themselves.

There are various strategies that a parent may use to assist their child to develop positive self-esteem and these are explained in detail (with examples) on page 7.

Most of the strategies are based on common sense and cover things such as:

- your relationship with your child,
- creating a safe haven,
- how to praise your child's efforts,
- how and when to criticise behaviour and your expectations of your child,
- understanding your child's strengths and interests,
- being open about your own strengths and weaknesses,
- not comparing your child's performance to others, and
- ensuring that your child experiences success.

The self-esteem of all children should be actively facilitated. This is especially vital for children experiencing difficulty learning as their self-esteem is challenged constantly by negative messages and the experience of failure.

Parents play a significant role in shaping their child's opinion of themselves and they need to actively employ strategies to enhance it where possible.

A LIFE TURNED AROUND – DOMINIC MAHONEY

"The frustrations and problems associated with dyslexia are something I've struggled with all my life," said Dominic Mahoney, an actor and model who has recently confronted his learning problem and turned his life around.

> In all the world there is no other child exactly like you.
> In the millions of years that have passed,
> there has never been a child like you.
>
> *Pablo Casals (Feeney et al., 1987)*

Dominic's story is compelling and heart-wrenching.

All too often we read about the link between learning problems at school and behavioural problems, low self-esteem and longer-term potential drug and alcohol abuse. Whilst we know the link is there, we don't often hear about individuals who have been through these consequences.

Dominic's 12-year battle with alcohol and drugs until the age of 30 stemming from his inability to read and write is not unique. What is unique and very special about this young man, is his willingness to share his story to help others.

"Things started changing for me in Year 1 at school," recalled Dominic. "I couldn't keep up with the work the teacher was providing in class, in particular reading and writing.

"I found myself not hearing the sounds. I began to look out the window and was always day dreaming in class because I couldn't keep up with the work. I'd be in my own little world.

"To look after myself I used to be the bully, so I wouldn't get picked on. I had some good teachers and I had some teachers that just didn't bother with me," said Dominic.

"I think that it got to a stage in Year 3 or 4 that I'd copped too much in my younger years so I just rebelled and didn't want to learn any more – I'd had enough and I just wanted to block it out.

"My Year 5 and 6 teachers labelled me as lazy and stupid. My teacher in Year 6 told the whole class right at the beginning of the year that he wasn't going to bother with me. This had such a negative effect that I felt hostile towards him for the rest of the year."

Reading aloud was an everyday activity that Dominic dreaded. "The anxiety it triggered was horrifying," he said.

"My palms would sweat. My heart would pump 100 miles an hour and I would choke up inside. No words would come out of my mouth. The children would laugh at me and I felt that I was an outcast. I had very low self-esteem and as a result rebelled against school. I felt myself focusing on sport and excelling in rugby league. All through this ordeal I had no real support and no one could understand me. I had to fend for myself."

By the time Dominic reached high school, he could barely read and write. To save himself from humiliation, he would sit at the back of the classroom and when it was his turn to read, he would get one of the other students to read quietly to him. Dominic would then repeat it and it would appear that he was reading out loud by himself.

"Some teachers used to humiliate me," recalled Dominic.

"I remember one teacher in particular got me to stand up in front of the class in Year 7 to read aloud. He knew I was a poor reader, and I virtually couldn't read the paragraph that he gave me to read. He sat me down and turned around and said to the whole class 'my daughter's 5 years of age and can read much better than Dominic'.

"I got labeled as 'stupid' and 'lazy' and I believed it. When you get pounded so much for whatever reason either saying that you can't read and you can't write or you look ugly, you're going to think that.

"I rebelled," he said. "I was the clown, always making people laugh and distracting the class, getting thrown out so I wouldn't have to do the work.

"Now I can see why I had so much anger when I left school and I can see where the problems started to happen – the drug taking and the alcohol.

"There was a time when I was 18 after I had left school that I thought about suicide," recalled Dominic.

"I used to hang around with a group of guys who used to take drugs and they put me down because they knew I couldn't read or write – they used to play all sorts of mind games. That was probably the lowest point of my life.

"I took drugs and drank alcohol to numb the pain. The binge drinking lasted from 18 years of age to about 30 – around 12 years."

Dominic's father died about three years ago when he was 30 and he hit rock bottom.

"I knew deep down inside that I wasn't happy with myself," he said. "I started to look at things differently. I went to counselling and it opened up a whole new outlook. I delved into my family life, my schooling and my peers.

"The first day going back to the schoolroom environment was tough – it had all those bad memories. I was close to not going," recalled Dominic.

"I remember getting the train there. Walking to TAFE was a tug of war – part of me wanted to turn around and head home. But I managed to arrive on time for the class.

"The teacher that I had, and have still got, is so supportive, she's been fantastic. I had to go back to a classroom environment, sit down and we were actually reading around the class. I knew that I had to do it to overcome all my fears.

"There were about eight in the class and I was the youngest. Most of them were in their late 40s, 50s and 60s which surprised me. They were there for a lot of reasons. Some of them came from European backgrounds so English was their second language, and some of them were in the same boat as me.

"Everybody was encouraging and there was no laughing at each other whilst reading. If you made a mistake or if you didn't know the word they'd actually tell you, or vice versa. It was a really supportive group.

"However, I found I kept making the same mistakes week after week. I knew the words. It was a really frustrating thing and I started to do some research on it and found out about Dyslexia."

Dominic does recall some teachers who were interested in him and wanted to help. He also remembers his mother coming up to school and talking to them to try and find out what they could do to help him learn.

Changing schools twice in primary school made enduring friendships difficult, but he does remember getting along with his peers in high school.

"I was pretty popular at school, mainly because of sport," said Dominic. "I also used to get along with the girls so boys liked me because I knew all the girls."

Despite this, his main memory of going to school was one of terror.

"I used to dread going to school because you'd have to read all the time and it was just a nightmare.

"I've just started up going to counselling again. There are a couple of issues that I haven't dealt with that I've got to go through. There's still a lot of pain there. I've carried it for 30 years and it just doesn't disappear.

"I've read a lot of powerful books as well and that's really helped me. I think I've read about 14 or 15 books now and I had never completely read a book in my life before. I'm really stoked about it," he said.

Dominic's perception of himself has changed dramatically.

"I've got a lot more confidence and I'm a lot more positive. I really like myself now, whereas before I didn't like myself at all. That's why I was so destructive with the alcohol and the drug taking because I didn't respect myself.

"I'm still jumping hurdles, but I'm much happier now than I was before. I've got a bit of direction in my life now.

"I actually told a couple of close friends and they couldn't believe that I was dyslexic because of the jobs I'd held in the past. They were amazed about it, but really understanding.

"One friend in particular that lived with me when I first started schooling again would help me with my work. I'd ask him how to spell something or to read something and he was really supportive – that's what a true friend is all about.

"I was a bit anxious at first telling him because I remember the humiliation from the others – would he throw it back in my face? But he didn't, and to this day he still encourages me.

"He said that I should come forward and tell people about my story. I'm on a mission and I'm not ashamed of it now. I was really ashamed of it before, but now I know there's so many people out there with this problem and they have made something of their lives.

"Einstein was sacked from two universities for poor spelling. There are many celebrities that have acknowledged their learning difficulties. Unfortunately all the people that made it are a small minority compared to people out there who are really suffering.

"There's something like 24 million people in America who have some form of dyslexia – more than the population of Australia. I think there's a couple of million in Australia."

Dominic still has good days and bad days. Most days his reading is fine and then he will have a day when spelling is difficult and frustrating.

"I've achieved so much with the limitations I've had – I've passed exams at TAFE, I've held high pressure jobs. But it just got to me – I was sick and tired of fooling myself. I got to the stage where I'd had enough.

"If I had the chance to talk to parents of children with dyslexia, I'd say be very patient and give your children lots of love and understanding.

"I didn't have teachers who were patient with me and they would make me feel so uncomfortable that I would rebel. I honestly think that if I had some teachers that did understand me, I wouldn't be in this boat today. But that's the way it is and I'm here for a purpose now, to help others get through this type of problem."

Resources on Self-Esteem

These books and video are available for loan to Learning Links members.

- 'Building a child's self-image: a guide for parents' by Shirley Bever.
- 'Unlocking doors to self-esteem' by Lyn Fox & Francine Weaver.
- 'Liking myself' by Pat Palmer.
- 'Creating Kids who Can' by Jean Robb & Hillary Letts.
- 'Confident Kids' by Dr Janet Hall.
- Video: 'You can do it! Boosting motivation, self-esteem and achievement: What every parent can do' by Michael Bernard.

Books for preschool children on self-esteem include:

- 'Amy & Henry' by Stephen King.
- 'What makes me happy?' by Catherine and Laurence Anholt.
- 'What do I look like?' by Nick Sharratt.

A useful teacher's resource is:

- 'Learning and Caring about Ourselves' by Gayle Bittinger.

Rating your child's Self-Esteem

- Think about your child's self-esteem in relation to both non-academic and academic factors.
- Consider how often your child feels positive about themselves in the following areas.
- Choose the most appropriate response option from never to always.

Never
Rarely
Sometimes
Most of the time
Always

Non-academic Self-esteem

Physical Appearance

.....

Physical Ability

.....

Peer Relationships

.....

Parent Relationships

.....

Academic Self-esteem

Mathematics

.....

Reading

.....

General School

.....

10 things a parent can do to help a child who learns differently

1. Be positive and supportive. Emphasise and praise achievements, skills, progress and effort. Seek out areas of strength. Show awareness of the difficulties caused by the learning disability. Make sure there is life outside school.
2. Create an environment at home where you can talk openly and acceptingly about the child's difficulties. Demystify yourself and the child. Help the child gain insight into his or her individual learning style.
3. Coach your child in developing strategies for coping with his or her learning disability so that the child can be more successful at school and work.
4. Participate in the planning of your child's academic program, especially Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings. Get involved in selection of teachers, courses and tutors. Follow progress at school and initiate discussions with teachers if things are not going well.
5. Share non-school activities with your child. Become coach of his or her athletic team, get involved in the boy or girl scout troop, do projects together, go camping, build something together. Have fun together!
6. Help with career planning. Discuss different types of jobs and careers and coach your child to choose directions that match his or her abilities. Encourage school and training programs that will prepare your child for the choices that are made.
7. Set reasonable goals and realistic expectations. Do not make things too easy. Celebrate milestones and accomplishments in the child's life. When the child does not succeed, help put the circumstances into perspective and make plans to try again.
8. Practice patience. Being a parent can be frustrating. Be patient with yourself and with your child.
9. Don't be plagued by guilt. If needed, get professional help for yourself, because the child can "read" what you're feeling. Acknowledge that both the strengths and difficulties that the child was born with may have been inherited from a parent or grandparent.
10. Be a positive role model. Every child needs someone to emulate.

For additional reading on this subject, the Schwab Foundation for Learning recommends the article "Living with Dyslexia: One Parent's Experience" by Leonard J Hartwig, published in the Annals of Dyslexia, Vol 34, 1984, and available in the Schwab Foundation for Learning Library or **www.learningdifferences.org**

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How to improve your child's Self-Esteem

The parent/child relationship.

The first feedback a child receives about their value and worth is from their relationship with their parents. To enhance your child's self-esteem, spend quality time with your child, respect your child and listen to your child.

Be a safe haven for your child.

Children with learning difficulties experience failure and hence negative messages about themselves in many aspects of their life. Parents need to create an environment and relationship with their child where the child feels special and valued. If a child is constantly faced with negative messages about themselves they will absorb these negative messages and come to see themselves in that light. Think about the messages that you and significant others send your child.

Praise your child's efforts.

Praise works best when it is given often, with enthusiasm and you mean what you say. Teach children to praise themselves. Ask 'what do you like best about your project?' and encourage children to praise others. When praising your child, focus on their effort rather than the outcome. A child may get an answer correct after spending five minutes focusing on the question – praise the effort they made not the fact they got it correct. This will increase their motivation to try hard the next time.

Criticise carefully.

Do not criticise your child in front of others and only criticise the child's behaviour not the child. Avoid 'you are' messages that say something bad about the child's character rather than their behaviour. Phrases like 'you are lazy, untidy, naughty, a nuisance, a bully, shy, a sook' do not encourage positive self-esteem. As parents, we often pay most attention to a child's negative behaviour and forget to praise appropriate behaviour. Reward positive behaviour and ignore negative behaviour as much as possible. Not only will this decrease the occurrence of negative behaviour, but you will spend less time sending negative messages to your child.

Establish realistic expectations.

It is important to have expectations of your child that are consistent with their potential. If expectations are too high the child will lose motivation to try as they soon realise they will not meet expectations despite all efforts. If expectations are too low they will realise it is easy to achieve and may lose the motivation to try.

Identify and encourage your child's strengths and interests.

All children have either something they are good at or something they are interested in. It is important that parents identify these areas or skills and help promote them if possible. List your child's strengths and/or interests and think about ways you can support your child's involvement in these activities.

Talk about your weaknesses and strengths.

Discussing your weaknesses and strengths with your child openly will help them understand that all people experience success and failure at times. Let your child assist you with something that you find difficult to boost their self-esteem.

Compare your child's performance with their past performance not with the performance of others.

When your child is evaluating their performance on an activity encourage them to compare their performance with how they have fared in the past, not with how others performed. They are more likely to experience success more often when this mode of evaluation is used.

Ensure that your child experiences success.

It is wonderful that parents provide extra support to children experiencing difficulty at school. This needs to be balanced by participating in activities that the child enjoys and/or experiences success in. Don't make them feel like life is only about practising what they are not good at. Think about your child. How many hours does your child spend doing things they have difficulty with? How many hours does your child spend doing things they experience success at? As an adult, if you spent 8 hours each day in a job at which you felt incompetent, how would your self-esteem fare?

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Early Childhood Services
– all enquiries to Head Office

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– Head Office

Head Office
12-14 Pindari Road
Peakhurst NSW 2210
Telephone: (02) 9534 1710
Preschool: (02) 9533 3283
Facsimile: (02) 9584 2054
Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au

Northern Suburbs Branch
2 Alfred Road
PO Box 634
Brookvale NSW 2100
Telephone: (02) 9907 4222
Facsimile: (02) 9907 4244
Email: nsb@learninglinks.org.au

Western Suburbs Branch
Unit 7/9 William Street
PO Box 1026
Fairfield NSW 1860 (2165)
Telephone: (02) 9754 2377
Facsimile: (02) 9755 9422
Email: wsb@learninglinks.org.au

Southern Suburbs Branch
10 Railway Parade
Penshurst NSW 2222
Telephone: (02) 9580 4888
Facsimile: (02) 9580 4788
Email: ssb@learninglinks.org.au

South West Sydney Branch
88 Shropshire Street
PO Box 42
Miller NSW 2168
Telephone: (02) 8783 7111
Facsimile: (02) 8783 7222
Email: sws@learninglinks.org.au

Eastern Suburbs Branch
1/20 Silver Street
Randwick NSW 2032
Telephone: (02) 9398 5188
Facsimile: (02) 9326 5364
Email: esb@learninglinks.org.au

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