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Your Child's Mental Health: Building Self-Esteem in Children

Most parents have heard that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" and it's especially true with self-esteem in children. All children need love and appreciation and thrive on positive attention. Yet, how often do parents forget to use words of encouragement such as, "that's right," "wonderful," or "good job"? No matter the age of children or adolescents, good parent-child communication is essential for raising children with self-esteem and confidence.

Self-esteem is an indicator of good mental health. It is how we feel about ourselves. Poor self-esteem is nothing to be blamed for, ashamed of, or embarrassed about. Some self-doubt, particularly during adolescence, is normal—even healthy—but poor self-esteem should not be ignored. In some instances, it can be a symptom of a mental health disorder or emotional disturbance.

Parents can play important roles in helping their children feel better about themselves and developing greater confidence. Doing this is important because children with good self-esteem:

- Act independently
- Assume responsibility
- Take pride in their accomplishments
- Tolerate frustration
- Handle peer pressure appropriately
- Attempt new tasks and challenges
- Handle positive and negative emotions
- Offer assistance to others



Words and actions have great impact on the confidence of children, and children, including adolescents, remember the positive statements parents and caregivers say to them. Phrases such as "I like the way you" or "You are improving at" or "I appreciate the way you" should be used on a daily basis. Parents also can smile, nod, wink, pat on the back, or hug a child to show attention and appreciation.

What else can parents do?

- Be generous with praise. Parents must develop the habit of looking for situations in which children are doing good jobs, displaying talents, or demonstrating positive character traits.
- Remember to praise children for jobs well done and for effort.
- Teach positive self-statements. It is important for parents to redirect children's inaccurate or negative beliefs about themselves and to teach them how to think in positive ways.
- Avoid criticism that takes the form of ridicule or shame. Blame and negative judgments are at the core of poor self-esteem and can lead to emotional disorders.
- Teach children about decision making and to recognize when they have made good decisions. Let them "own" their problems. If they solve them, they gain confidence in themselves. If you solve them, they'll remain dependent on you. Take the time to answer questions. Help children think of alternative options.
- Show children that you can laugh at yourself. Show them that life doesn't need to be serious all the time and that some teasing is all in fun. Your sense of humor is important for their well-being.

Take Charge of Your Time

Time is a precious commodity that's available to all of us in equal parts to use as we choose.

"Time is your personal possession. Nobody can manage it or fix it for you," says Glenn Van Ekeren, author of "12 Simple Secrets of Happiness at Work." "One of the best ways to use your time wisely is to ask yourself, 'Is this the best way for me to be spending my time right now?' And, if it isn't, change your activity to one that will bring value to your company."

Here are Mr. Van Ekeren's other suggestions to help you get a hold on wasted time.

Peak hours -- Schedule work according to your peak productivity time. Dedicate those hours when you're most productive to doing things that give the highest return and produce the greatest value.

- Determine your priorities -- "Overambitious to-do lists can be unrealistic and anti-productive," says Mr. Van Ekeren. "Make choices. Sort out your 'have-to's' from your 'choose-to's.' You'll be amazed how many times you chose to do rather than have to do. Direct your energies toward activities that are the most important to you."
- Go for results -- Be result-oriented rather than activity-oriented. Activity doesn't equal accomplishment. "Measure your effectiveness by what you achieve, not by how busy you are," says Mr. Van Ekeren.
- Get organized -- Have a place for everything and have everything in its place, then maintain that sense of order.
- Learn to say no -- Busy people must simply learn to refuse some demands on their time. "It's natural not to want to disappoint people, but sometimes we're unrealistic about our time limits," says Mr. Van Ekeren. "It's easy to let our ego get in the way of saying no. But you'll never feel in control if you're biting off more than you can chew."
- Work on your attitude -- Your attitude about how busy you are, the amount of time you have or the demands on your life can sabotage any effort to make the most of the time you have. Be flexible. Not everything will go as expected. Mr. Van Ekeren advises seeking new opportunities when your game plan runs into roadblocks.
- Do it right the first time -- If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?
- Place deadlines on yourself -- Don't allow minor or major projects to drag on indefinitely. Challenge yourself with deadlines and beat them. "Try not to leave projects hanging at the end of the day," says Mr. Van Ekeren. "Bring closure to as much as you can."
- Prepare for unexpected downtime -- Spare minutes created by waiting in airports, restaurants or traffic can be the perfect time to complete small projects.
- Get up earlier -- By rising 30 minutes earlier each day, you add 3-1/2 hours of productivity to your week. "Multiply that by 52 weeks, and you'll have an additional 180 hours to accomplish your priorities," says Mr. Van Ekeren. "I've used these extra hours to write books and get energized by reading inspirational reading material."

How to Keep Your Gums and Teeth Healthy

Three out of four adults over age 35 have some form of gum disease, dental experts say, and gum disease is a primary cause of tooth loss. Gum disease is caused by plaque -- a sticky film made of bacteria, mucus and other particles -- that forms on the teeth. When the plaque is not removed, it hardens into tartar that harbors bacteria. The bacteria in the plaque and tartar cause inflammation of the gums called gingivitis. Tartar can only be removed by a dental hygienist or dentist.

Gum disease has three stages:

- Gingivitis, the early stage, is characterized by red, swollen gums that bleed easily. When caught early, the condition often can be reversed by proper brushing and flossing.
- Periodontitis (which means inflammation around the tooth), is a more advanced form of gum disease that occurs when plaque that hasn't been removed hardens into tartar. This causes the gums to pull away from the teeth and form pockets of infected material. The bacterial toxins start to break down the bone and connective tissue hold the teeth in place, causing the teeth to loosen and fall out. It can be treated by scraping tartar off teeth roots or, if severe enough, with gum surgery.
- Advanced periodontitis is characterized by further gum recession and bone destruction. At this stage, teeth may need to be extracted if periodontal surgery doesn't restore bone support.

Symptoms of periodontal disease usually appear when the condition is advanced. Symptoms are:

- Bad breath that persists
- Red, swollen, tender gums
- Pain chewing
- Loose or sensitive teeth

Risk factors

The following factors put a person at more risk for developing gingivitis:

- Smoking or using chewing tobacco
- Hormonal changes in girls and women
- Diabetes
- Some medications

Proper prevention

Good oral hygiene -- including brushing and flossing at least once every day -- can help prevent gum infections, cavities and tooth loss. Having your teeth cleaned and checked by a dentist or dental hygienist at least once a year also is important, dental experts say. No matter how well you brush, tartar and plaque can still build up and cause gum problems.

To brush correctly:

- Do so in the morning and before going to sleep.
- Use a soft-bristled brush and toothpaste that contains fluoride. If you can afford the cost, buy and use an electric toothbrush.
- Place your toothbrush at a 45-degree angle against your gums and brush each tooth 15 to 20 times.
- Move the brush gently, using short strokes; don't scrub.
- Brush the outer tooth surfaces using short, back-and-forth strokes.
- Brush the inner upper-front teeth by brushing vertically against them using short, downward strokes. Use short, upward strokes for lower inside teeth.
- Brush the chewing surfaces of the teeth with short, back-and-forth strokes. Replace your toothbrush when it's worn or frayed -- about every three or four months, experts say. You should also get a new toothbrush after you have had a cold, strep throat or similar illness.

Floss with care

Flossing helps remove plaque and food particles stuck between your teeth. To floss properly:

- Cut off about 18 inches of floss and hold it tightly between your thumbs and forefingers. Guide it between your teeth using a gentle, rubbing motion.
- When the floss reaches the gum line, curve it around one tooth. Gently rub the side of the tooth, moving the floss with up-and-down motions. Repeat this method on the rest of your teeth, remembering to floss the back side of your back teeth.

Watch what you eat

The foods you eat contribute to tooth decay when they combine with bacteria in your mouth. To protect your teeth:

- Consume plenty of calcium-rich foods, such as milk, yogurt and cheese. Calcium maintains the bone the tooth roots are embedded in. This is particularly important for the elderly and for children during development of both baby and adult teeth.
- Avoid sticky sweets, such as soft candies, toffees, taffies and pastries. If you eat sweets, rinse your mouth with water afterward or brush your teeth if you have a chance.
- If you chew gum, chew sugar-free brands.