

Confidence IS A virtue



Kevin Harcombe explains how simple techniques for boosting your children's self-esteem can improve both their behaviour and their performance...



There is a well-established link between levels of self-esteem and performance. This is true for adults as well as for children. The child who 'just can't get it' in a lesson is going through the same lack of confidence as the Premier League striker who hasn't scored for five games (though without the undoubted consolation of £50,000 a week).

Self-esteem is the gap between ideal self and perceived self. Where the gap is small or non-existent, then self-esteem is high and attainment is likely to be high also. The bigger that gap, the less well a person – not just a child – is likely to do. I am making the parallel with adults because teachers' self-esteem can be a factor in that of their pupils.

For example, if you say to your class, "I'm rubbish at art", you are demonstrating your own lack of esteem in that area – which is especially a concern as you are being paid to teach it. It may indeed be true that you are to art what the *X Factor* is to music, but, whilst it is sensible not to set yourself up as the world's most talented polymath, how you express your own deficiencies to the children needs to be framed

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in a positive way: "I find art difficult, but I'm working hard at it and actually I'm much better than I was this time last year – and you can improve at it too!". Teachers with high self-esteem are more likely to be able to promote it amongst their children.

Make sure expectations are realistic. A child who is constantly met with challenges that they will fail will inevitably have low self-esteem. Set clear objectives and aims so children know what success looks like rather than feeling worried that they are incapable of achieving it. If you know your children well – not just academically but as people – you should never inadvertently set them up for a fall. Be careful with ability groups – how you explain how they are set up and who works with particular groups. They can become fixed, self-fulfilling prophecies. Children are very sensitive to such things and, however you name groups, they will know exactly

where they are in the pecking order. Make sure there are opportunities every week for children to work in self-selecting, mixed ability groups.

A teacher has a crucial role in building a sense of belonging – groups, class, teams, school, community, places where every individual has a role to play and where every individual is given appropriate opportunities to contribute. This cultivates a sense of looking out for and looking after each other.

Benefiting behaviour

Self-esteem has an impact on behaviour – the child who thinks they will always receive negative comments, or who feels they are not successful or not clever enough, has no incentive to behave well. You need to provide those incentives. In order for this to impact positively on lessons you need to do it from the word go, as soon as they walk in each morning. Tell the child how well they did, or how hard they tried in the previous lesson, and offer a form of reward if they do similarly well in this one. Express unshakeable confidence in their ability to do really well.

Interestingly, one sign of low self-esteem in a pupil is that they may be boastful, attention seeking, disruptive and loud. They may be apathetic, or even aggressive, and look to blame others for their own failings. Whilst this may seem the opposite of our idea of a person with low self-esteem, it is well-established that these are outward signs of someone who is struggling. It also makes it harder for the teacher to praise and nurture when the child seems, frankly, offensive and ungrateful. The truth is that children who are seemingly least deserving of our support and understanding are actually the ones who need it most.

Never ignore or accept the unacceptable, but be careful to condemn the behaviour and not the person. This may seem like splitting hairs, but there is an important distinction. Separate the behaviour from the person. If you say "You are unkind and nasty", you are at some level saying that the person is inherently (and possibly irrevocably) unkind and nasty. The implication is they always will be. Their destiny is seemingly fixed, so they do not even try to change. If, however, you use the subtly different "What you have just said was unkind and nasty", you are focusing on an act which does not have to be repeated. Behaviour can be seen as temporary and subject to change; who you are is permanent – a label that is forever fixed.

Use named and specific praise when a child does something well – or, if not exactly well, at least better than they have done it before. "Well done" is not enough. "Well done, Rashid," is better. "Well done, Rashid – you have listened really carefully" is best. The child knows specifically what you are pleased about and can take pride in it. Rewards are always better than sanctions and should be given out generously. The system for triggering rewards and sanctions should be clear, simple, consistent and understood by



all. The best systems are co-devised with the children and reviewed regularly to make sure they are fair and working. Have non-competitive reward systems so all are capable of achieving. Learning spellings or times tables is not a race. Praise and value individual effort as opposed to pecking order.

Best of all, share successes – with parents, other staff and other children – and not just academic success: acts of kindness or thoughtfulness are just as important. Tell classmates how well an individual has done. Send them to another teacher for additional praise. A phone call home or a text or email with the good news gives parents the chance to reinforce the positive message. Know the children well and what works for them – who would respond to praise in front of the whole class and who would rather it was one-to-one. There are some children who would be mortified to receive praise in front of their peers, but a quiet word before break or in the course of the lesson will have them glowing with pride.

It's good to talk

Some teachers think that allowing children to air their innermost anxieties and sensitivities is a prerequisite to raising self-esteem. Whilst it is sensible to provide opportunities in the curriculum to discuss emotions, this has to be handled very carefully. You should not lead children on with any questions you might ask – you are not Trisha or Jeremy Kyle (though some of the tales you hear from your children might not be out of place in such settings). Talking about community / personal issues is most often undertaken at circle time and, sadly, is done badly more often than it is done well. Some children will hate having to talk about themselves and their

Give them a boost

SIMPLE ROUTES TO RAISING A CHILD'S SELF-ESTEEM...

- Give them a smile – so effective and so often forgotten by teachers
- Give them named praise – so they are clear what it is in response to
- Give them a tangible reward – sticker / house points / golden time etc.
- Give them a monitor-type job to do – it shows trust and encourages responsibility
- Set up a buddy system to pair them with someone who can give them a boost. Especially useful if they have no or few friends
- Get classmates to write down on a post-it good stuff about them and stick it on their table.
- Set up an activity you know they can succeed at – success breeds success
- Say thank you often and whenever they do anything good
- Never ever raise your voice to them. If you need to say you are angry – and sometimes you do – say so evenly and dispassionately
- Take every opportunity to tell them how well you think they are doing and how well you know they can do – as individuals and as a group or whole class

You are in the business of encouraging individuals' dreams and hopes. Never ever dismiss them

feelings, so do not make them. Other children will hog it and want to talk about things – home life or confidential issues – that should never be aired other than on a one-to-one basis.

Debunking 'perfection'

Consider the pressure children are under from the world around them, especially the media. Children see air-brushed physical perfection just as they're feeling a bit spotty or overweight. They see images of super-confident, super-talented youngsters in sport or entertainment. Inevitably, they will measure themselves against these benchmarks and invariably feel they are lacking. As a teacher, do not add to this pressure; rather, help them to understand it and deal

with it. Tell them how magazine pictures are doctored to remove blemishes. Tell them about apparently supremely confident performers who are often trembling, puking wrecks before facing the cameras. Bring some humanity and realism back to our appraisal of so-called 'celebrities'.

Tell them stories of successful people who overcame significant obstacles in achieving their success – great writers and actors suffering from dyslexia, athletes who overcome physical difficulties and so on. You should be encouraging their secret ambitions and desires by developing a supportive 'can do' approach. You are in the business of encouraging individuals' dreams and hopes. Never ever dismiss them.

