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BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN THE ADULT-CHILD SYSTEM

A baby with poor self-esteem? That is a nonsensical statement. Babies just are. When do you remember first feeling shame? or not liking something about yourself? I often watch toddlers and enjoy their joy at being- being alive, being active, and being special. They seem to have no cares in the world. Their fears are momentary and quickly replaced by some new excitement of being. But somehow, probably during their preschool ages 2, 3, and 4, guilt and shame and doubt begin to make inroads on their self-esteem. How essential is this age? It is the beginning of the process of potential self-esteem destruction that reaches its zenith during adolescence. I recall a colleague quoting a study that found that while 85% of kindergartners have high self-esteem, only 20% of 10 year olds (4th grade) have high self-esteem, and tragically a mere 5% of high school seniors have high self-esteem. From our personal experiences in high school, many of us know that last figure must be correct. Much of our adult lives has been an often painful struggle to regain the self-esteem lost during childhood and adolescence. I have seen this all too often in my work as a therapist with adults. This is certainly motivation to build well, or at least, to not allow as much devastation of children's self esteem in the first place.

The foundation of children's self-esteem is the significant adults in their lives: their parents and other caregivers such as teachers. the adult's self-esteem and psychological and emotional health underlies the children's psychological health. Like a building with a poor foundation, children's self-esteem will always be shaky and subject to environmental influences (peer pressure, the media, abusive people, and so forth). As you, as an important adult in children's lives strengthen your own self-esteem- get healthy- learn to care for yourself- learn to take care of yourself, children involved with you will more and more securely venture out into the real and sometimes dangerous world to find his/her own way.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT ABOUT SELF-ESTEEM?

It's scary out there in the real adult world. There are a lot of people out there who need to hate. A few years ago, David Duke, who was an admitted racist and Ku Klux Klan member got over half the white vote in Louisiana for governor. Hating the Japanese (or substitute Koreans) is OK again according to some politicians. Illegal immigrants have become easy targets for political demagogues- Governor Pete Wilson came out recently advocating against giving prenatal health care to illegal immigrant women, endangering the health of the American citizens that they will bear. Women and children are battered and killed in their homes every day. There are many people with tremendous problems (with, probably low self-esteem at the basis of them) who will abuse and harm you and vulnerable children in emotional, psychological ways as well as social, cultural, political, and physical ways. One way to look at the world is to say that there are roughly three classes of people in the world: abusers, victims, and survivors.

The abusers are the people who lack self-esteem and the accompanying sense of power and control in their lives to such a degree that they can only seek esteem and power through the destruction of other people.

The victims are the people who lack self-esteem and the accompanying sense of power and control



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in their lives to such a degree that they do not think or feel that they can stop themselves from being abused, and that they think and feel that they deserve the abuse in some form or fashion.

The survivors are the ones who have sufficient self-esteem and the accompanying sense of power and control in their lives that they do not need to abuse others to feel good about themselves or to have a sense of power; they have and seek more personally and socially healthy and adaptive ways to feel good and achieve power. The survivors refuse to be victims; they know they do not deserve to be abused, and they know they have the power to fight for themselves against the abusers.

The goal of this building self-esteem is to help you and your children be the survivors rather than the abusers or victims in this abusive society- and to be the survivors who will flourish and maybe rebuild this society.

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM MADE UP OF?

One perspective drawing from theory and research by Coopersmith is to break it down into these four aspects:

- 1) A sense of ACCEPTANCE by the important adults in the child's life.
- 2) A sense of POWER & CONTROL over his/her own body, environment, and relationships.
- 3) A sense of MORAL VIRTUE- that he/she feels him/herself to be a good worthy person.
- 4) A sense of COMPETENCE that he/she is capable, can accomplish, can achieve and can do or manage tasks
and reach worthwhile goals.

Here is a simple example of how these four aspects can be played out positively and negatively in a routine preschooler's experience- putting on his/her shoes:

POSITIVE- "That's great you're trying to put on your own shoes. Let's see how you do. Way to go!" There is acceptance and encouragement without any potential negative judgements. Attempts at power & control and competence are being supported. self-acceptance- moral virtue is being encouraged.

NEGATIVE- "You can't do that. I gonna have to do it anyway. Why are you taking so long? What's wrong with you?" Here is non-acceptance, discouraging attempts at power & control and competence. Implied is that something is wrong with the child- his/her moral virtue is attacked.

None of us purposely are so negative to children. However, in times of stress and frustration, we sometimes forget and express our frustration in harmful ways. Taking care of yourself includes taking care of your stress and frustration. Then you can be the most available and aware for your child. Many adults focus on taking care of their children by ignoring their own needs. When a person does this, they become a negative model of self-care, self-nurturing, and self-love. They show and live a model of other people being more important than themselves. The children are much more likely to live down to this model than to heed the verbal messages to take care of themselves; they too will sacrifice their needs for others- after all, that's what mom does! On the other hand, when the adult gives his/her own needs primacy, he/she becomes a self-loving model for the child. As a consequence, the child will tend to better take care of him/herself- after all that's what mom does! Of course, there are times that your child does need you to do for him/her what



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he/she cannot do, and when doing so does not ignore your needs. It is the appropriate responsibility of parents and other caregivers to distinguish between true nurturing and the kind of martyrdom that comes with extreme self-sacrifice. We all know what happens to martyrs, but we also need to know what happens to martyrs' children!

I will be giving you what I think are seven areas from which to build your child's self-esteem. But before giving you the steps, I want to make sure you can use them. So, first I will give you seven foundations for building self-esteem. I want to make the "how-to" instructions usable. To do that I will also get into the "whys" of "whats" and "how tos". I am going to do this instead of just telling what to do because this prescription is just like a diet. Just about all diets can work if you follow through with them...more or less- eat less and exercise more. The "if" about following through is the "Big One" however. Why can't we follow through? Because we sabotage ourselves. Why? Because of a lot of things. How do we succeed in dieting? By understanding the whys and whats and hows of sabotage, dealing with them, and then getting on with the diet. The same follows for this prescription. I feel that the ideas and tools that I will give you are great ideas and tools. But I would be misleading you, if you were to come out thinking that it is the ideas and tools that will really make it. It is you, the idea and tool wielder that makes the difference. That is why this is titled "Building Self-esteem in the Adult-Child System", instead of "Building Self-esteem in the Child".

SO WHERE DOES IT BEGIN AND HOW IS IT GAINED AND LOST?

As babies, they don't even know that they are separate organisms from their mothers. What happens so that latter you see kids and adults with obvious and not so obvious low self-esteem? Where it happens is in the family and in the school and in the community. When does it happen? Think back... when do you recall first feeling bad about yourself? 1 year old? 2 years old? 3 years old? 4 years old? 5 years old? From working with young children, you will probably remember noticing negative self-perspectives being around two to three years of age. This is toddlerhood, when according to Erik Erikson, the child seeks to gain more autonomy, explores, and becomes the "Terrible Two!" This is when we often begin feeding back negatives to them as we as the adults try to help them socialize into our communities at home and at school. A feedback loop exists where, initially, the child has a sense of self developed from basic nurturing interactions with mom and dad. Then, the

self-conceptions: beliefs, concepts, expectations, attitudes, temperament manifest themselves in...

behavior: which happens in the environment-family, school, community, which leads to...

feedback from adults: about being good or bad, which leads back to...

ones self-concept.

Each area of this endless loop can be affected with more or less effectiveness by you. Although, I will refer to these other two parts of the loop, the place of major effect that I am going to focus on is in the feedback loop- you as the important adults in the children's environment feeding back to the child whether the behavior is good or bad and/or whether he/she is good or bad. Thus, his/her self-conception as good or bad creates his/her self-esteem. It follows then that you, the feedback voice



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is the foundation for the child's self-esteem.

FOUNDATIONS OF BUILDING SELF ESTEEM IN CHILDREN

Without the foundation, no building can stand. Every year we see news stories of houses whose foundations have been washed away by storms. As the foundation is washed away, the house itself gradually crumbles to the ground under its own weight. Unless the basics of self-esteem prescription are in hand or in progress in an healthy manner, all the other guidelines about self-esteem are so much hot air. It becomes like giving binoculars or a microscope to a blind man; the tools cannot be used. Or, it may be like giving advanced marathon training to someone who has not learned how to walk yet- to someone who has learned his/her fundamentals yet. A lot of great How-To instruction is wasted this way.

Building the foundation is the hard part. But, once you get the foundation built, the rest is not so hard- perhaps, even easy. Without a strong foundation, you will continually flounder about...holding this up, repairing this, doing damage control.....questioning yourself, being frustrated.....and losing the struggle to build children's self-esteem as your self-esteem deteriorates. Does that sound or feel familiar?

The foundations of self esteem are sequential- the first parts are the basis of the subsequent parts; the latter parts depend on the previous parts. To build a good foundation, you usually need to dig down a little bit. In this case, digging down means digging down into your childhood and life experiences as the beginning step, because first, you must

1) KNOW YOURSELF- know your own temperament, continue to keep growing, clean-up more and more of your family of origin garbage, and experiences; getting out from under your emotional and psychological baggage (or what I often refer to as your personal "Twilight Zone", and into your present reality. From knowing yourself, you begin to lay the second part of the foundation by

2) BEING A MODEL OF SELF-LOVE- Besides some temperament, some physical traits, and some intellectual traits inherited from his/her parents, each child inherits as the basis of his/her self-esteem, his/her caregivers' self-esteem. What are you giving him/her? "The Greatest Love of All" sung first by George Benson and more recently by Whitney Houston, encourages all to learn to like and love yourself. I originally had problems with this song because in it, Muhammad Ali, who was speaking of himself, sounded so vain. It seemed to be against the Western idea of pridefulness being sinful. False pride is not positive, however, self-love is essential to good health. It all fits together. We know not to be abusers to our children, but it is also important to not take any abuse from anyone (including from children!). I am often disturbed by the amount of abuse that otherwise intelligent adults take from children.

If you are not going to believe in yourself or love yourself or take care of yourself, why should anyone else believe in, love, or take care of you? If your child's parent or teacher (that's you) doesn't believe in, love, or take care of him/herself, why should your child think he/she should believe in, love, or take care of him/herself? To be a model of self-love, you must

3) TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF...FIRST!- This may rub you wrong as well. Self-sacrifice is for



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martyrs (the problems with being a martyr is that first you suffer a lot and then you die! This is not why you got into this profession!) and for insecure people. The underlying message of self-sacrifice is that everyone else and their needs are more important than myself and my needs. You are worse than useless to your child if you do not take care of yourself first. You become a negative model of placing oneself second to others. Children will model you, and consider him/herself less worthwhile than others as well!

The first three blocks or parts to the foundation really have to do with you and you getting **YOURSELF AND YOUR SELF-ESTEEM TOGETHER FIRST**. You cannot give what you do not possess yourself; you cannot share what you do not have enough of for yourself. What do you need to do? **WORK THROUGH YOUR PERSONAL EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BAGGAGE, SO YOUR BUTTONS WILL NO LONGER BE SO EASILY PUSHED**. Work to discover not only the negatives- what not to do, but also to discover the positives of acting and relating to make your life wonderful. Why? Because it is when you know yourself and can love and take care of yourself then you can add to the foundation of self-esteem by

4) BEING EMOTIONALLY AND PHYSICALLY AVAILABLE- You cannot be available if you are still overwhelmed in your confusion about who and what you are, your self-hatred, and your sense of being not taken care of. Your energies are depleted in dealing with this in your emotional and psychological Twilight Zone.

You count, you matter. Your child needs to know that he/she counts and matters too. He/she gets that basic psychological and emotional security from your being emotionally and physically available to him/her. If you are available, then he/she knows he/she counts. If you are not available, then he/she thinks he/she doesn't count. By making yourself count, you can make the children count! Ironically, this is when you can further help them by now being able to

5) SEPARATE- Be emotionally available but define and keep your and children's boundaries distinct. This is part of how you give each child his/her chance to have power. By separating, you allow children to feel stress; and to deal with it (successfully). This is empowerment rather than rescuing. It is through experience with anxiety (anticipatory anxiety) that the child learns how to cope with it in a healthy manner.

Do not get enmeshed in each other. Respect and teach respect of each other boundaries. When you invade your child's boundaries by being overly invested in him/her emotionally, by being demanding, and by judging, you are being abusive (although not necessarily an abuser). When you allow your child to invade your boundaries, you are teaching him/her it is OK to abuse others.

The essence of abuse is the invasion of boundaries: sexual, physical, emotional abuse. Children desperately need boundaries. It is terrifying to exist without clear ones; thus the need to continually test for them when they are not consistent.

When you are able to know, love, and take care of yourself, and be emotionally and physically available, then you can get further out of your Twilight Zone and learn how to

6) DISTINGUISH LOVE & LIKE- This involves allowing yourself and letting the child know that you will never fall out of LOVE with him/her, but you do occasionally fall out of LIKE with him/her) Parental LOVE is always and unconditional (hopefully), as is the quality of most caregivers LOVE for children, however LIKE is transitional and conditional. It is OK not to like a



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child, or children sometimes. This may be hard for some of us to do, because as children we may have been taught that our behavior was our essence; and if our behavior was bad so were we. It is important to distinguish between the essence of the child and relationship (who/which you can love unconditionally) and the behavior of the child (which you can dislike or even hate). Now, with all this you have enough of a strong foundation to lay the ground floor off of which you can build the structure- the child's self-esteem. Now, free of your emotional baggage, loving yourself, taking care of yourself, being available, being separate, free of guilt from not liking some behavior while loving the child, you can start to really

7) UNDERSTAND THE CHILD- his/her needs, moods, physical states, emotional states, temperament, environments: physical, social, emotional, familial, peer, and school. Until you have the strong foundation in your own self-esteem and understanding, you cannot really understand the child. Your comprehension until then will be distorted by the filter of your own issues, or you will not be able to accept the information nor be able to integrate it into your relationship with the child. This part is the beginning of building self-esteem as well as the last part of your foundation to build self-esteem. This is the ground floor. **THIS IS ALSO WHERE PARENTS AND TEACHERS USUALLY BEGIN BUILDING! RATHER THAN WITH THE FOUNDATION.** Unfortunately, since they may have skipped the foundation, they cannot build it properly.

GUIDELINES TO BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM IN YOUR CHILD

Now that the foundation has been set, you can build the house. In real life, the foundation is your own house/self-esteem; it is something you should always be working on. This next part is the easy part if the foundation is strong, that is, if your self-esteem, sense of self, and psychological health is secure. And, it is much more difficult or even impossible to build your child's self-esteem, if you- the foundation is weak. First, you must build the framework. Everything in the structure goes on the frame.

1) VALIDATE YOUR CHILD- This is hard to do this without understanding children and each child specifically. This is the key to the BELONGING/ACCEPTANCE aspect of Coopersmith's four aspects of self-esteem. How do you do this?

Support the child when he/she has fears, insecurities, and doubts; this is not the same as supporting fears, insecurities, and doubts.

Acknowledge, validate him/her...."you feel scared, huh?", "I understand..it's hard isn't it?", "It doesn't feel good does it?"

Do not minimize or try to undo the bad feelings by explaining why he/she doesn't need to feel scared, or why there "really" isn't any danger, or telling him/her that they are or will be OK (this can be taken as they should be OK). Doing this invalidates the child just as much as calling him/her a "baby", or "silly", "stupid", and so forth. When we try to explain away the child's bad feelings, it doesn't work; we get frustrated at the lack of reason; the lack of reception we are getting from them. There arises an imagined lack of respect, deference, listening, which cause us to then we feel our sense of inadequacy, impotency, insecurity, and ignorance. This, in turn, is frightening (especially since we have been trying to avoid these feelings).

Let your child be a child. And, every child can mess up...without being a messup. A



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messup is hopeless; messing up is curable or transitory.

Connect first, then lead the child to his/her strength or his/her security through your strength.

2) TEACH RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT SHAME, BLAME, & FAULT- Responsibility is about power and control. Shame, guilt, and fault is about ones rotten inner essence.

Avoid blaming and shaming; you can do this better as you better deal with your own shame and guilt issues. It is hard to avoid blaming and shaming if you still blame yourself, feel guilty, or feel the need to be forgiven. Show/model responsibility and give/expect responsibility. Look for the process of responsibility and not the product of responsibility; looking at the product leads to failure and the blaming and shaming that come with failure.

Society likes to blame. Few people are willing to take responsibility for the ills in our society, because we confuse blame with responsibility. One must take responsibility; one cannot take blame- it means one is a rotten person. You can create and direct opportunities for the child to have control and power, to be responsible, to solve problems, to choose without blame or guilt.

3A) TEACH THAT NO ONE SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO ABUSE HIM/HER-(including you!) This is hard to do if you still allow yourself to be abused. Acknowledge and admit your errors. Get out of your Twilight Zone.

3B) TEACH THEM TO ALWAYS TAKE CARE OF HIM/HERSELF-

to not to be co-dependent. You cannot possibly teach them to take care of themselves if the model they see in you is your sacrificing yourself continually for them!

4) CHALLENGE / NOT PUSH; HAVE EXPECTATIONS / NOT DEMANDS- Base your expectations of behavior on child centered appropriateness, instead of adult-generated standards, adult-generated fear of failure, or your reaction to your oppression as a child. Individualize all your and society's stuff to the child. Accept him/her as unique and special and treat him/her so--- individualize! (Watch out for when you use "because" as an answer. Notice when you don't have a logical reason for your demands. Watch out when your reasoning takes the moral high road; its probably your Twilight Zone acting up). "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." Don't sell yourself short; strive to reach your potential- challenge yourself, so you can be a model for the children- so that you can challenge them without hypocrisy.

5) PRAISE APPROPRIATELY- False praise rings hollow to even little children. Praise for lousy effort is insincere; and worse reinforces the lousy effort. It poorly prepares the child for the real world; it is not OK to give poor effort and to have low self expectations. Glenn and Nelson say, "The problem with praise is that it is efficient in making people dependent upon the approval of others." You must know the child to do this properly. False praise can build up a false self that the child is aware of as being false. Praise the process, validate the energy.

The goal of parental/adult praise should be to teach the child how to self-praise. Criticism is difficult depending on the child's temperament and sensitivity; it is incredibly difficult to do appropriately if the critic (you) is not staying with the child's abilities. All criticism should include praise; validate effort and energy; be honest; be age and child appropriate. Criticism should be toward extending the potential of the child- challenging at the edge of his/her potential, and not



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according to some outside standards.

Even socialization criticism must be at the child's level of comprehension and relevant (that is, a positive service) to his/her life.

6) CREATE INTERNALIZED MOTIVATION- Outside (parental or teacher) motivation is fine, but it is only transitory. If a child becomes dependent on an adult for motivation, why should he/she do anything if there is no one around to motivate him/her? Another term would be "values"- sets of internalized motivation, praise, morals are what enables an individual to progress in his/her life; to be resistant to peer influence, media messages, and other environmental influences.

At this point you are guiding him/her to continuing building his/her own structure of self-esteem! You will need to let go, and allow him/her to continue his/her own growth. You can teach them to be afraid to stand alone. Guide him/her to seek their own motivation.

YOU DO NOT NEED TO BE THE PERFECT PARENT or CAREGIVER. TRYING TO BE THE PERFECT PARENT OR TEACHER AND BLAMING/SHAMING YOURSELF FOR NOT BEING THE PERFECT PARENT OR TEACHER CREATES A POWERFUL MESSAGE TO YOUR CHILD. What's the message? "I (read 'you') must be perfect."

Your model of self-love, of loving, of honesty, and of humanity is the best message for self-esteem and health for your child. I often ask teachers and other caregivers, if they love children. "Of course, I love children," they respond. Then I challenge them by asking how much they love children; if they love children enough to face their own issues and fears- if they love them enough to be uncomfortable as they reaffirm the "Greatest Love of All." Addressing your own self-esteem, give both you and the children you work with the best person that one can be. You, the children, the profession, and our society will benefit.

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Biography

Ronald Mah, therapist and educator, combines concepts, principles, and philosophy with practical techniques and guidelines for effective and productive results. He uses humor and stories from his many experiences to illustrate important points in a stimulating and highly motivating and engaging style.

A Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, his experiences include: Asian-American community mental health, Severely Emotionally Disturbed mental health & school partnership programs, vocational programs for at risk youth, welfare to work programs, clinical consulting & cross and multi-cultural training for Head Start, other early childhood education programs, social services organizations, & mental health agencies, supervising a high school mental health clinic, training and supervising therapists, private practice in Castro Valley, author of the Asian Pacific Islander Parent Education Support curriculum.

Professional Education experiences include: 16 years in ECE, including owning and running a child development center for 11 years, Kindergarten, elementary, & secondary teaching credentials and experience, ethnic studies curriculum writer, community college instructor, Masters of Psychology



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instructor, and former member Board of Directors of the California Kindergarten Association and of the California Association of Marriage & Family Therapists.