

INCULCATE!

Nine-point someone

Here are nine sure-fire tips to raising your child with a healthy sense of self-esteem...

Words Ramya Srinivasan

Self-esteem in a child, are we getting paranoid and jumping years here? Apparently not, since a lot of research substantiates that a person's sense of self-esteem is derived from childhood experiences. As a parent, you cannot control the happenings in your child's life – whether he encounters successes or failures, but you can certainly educate him on how to respond to them. Just like academics ingrain basic concepts necessary for survival, developing a strong self-esteem assists your child in coping with tough real-life scenarios. Here are a few practical tips to start this early on.

1 SEPARATE THE PERSON FROM THE COMPETENCE:

The trick lies here in recognising that your child's identity is not just the sum of his skills, but there is more to it. Most of us tend to associate ourselves primarily with our profession or a particular skill. The trouble here is if we lose our job or the ability to perform the skill, our sense of self-esteem is deeply affected. Give your tiny tot the unconditional love that he deserves

irrespective of anything else and he will start seeing himself in the same light.

2 REINFORCE STRENGTHS: Understanding your child's positives is a key to boost his self-esteem. It does not have to be a skill like music or painting or a sport; it could also be that special nature to help others or to make friends easily or the ability to help you with things around the house. Identify it and nurture it like a treasure because this is what the child is naturally good at.

3 DISCUSS WEAKNESSES IN PRIVATE: The golden rule is to never put your child down in front of others and to always discuss weaknesses in a private setting. As logical as it sounds, it's not easy to implement. Children do the weirdest things in public, like picking their nose, and it's not effortless for parents to react with sophistication always. My four year old used to attend a summer camp where among other things, there were dance classes. One day, when I went to pick him up, his teacher complained about



his lack of dancing skills, to which I replied, "I know that he is not very good at it". As soon as the words came out, I observed my little one's face shrivel. After coming back home, I learnt that he had no inkling of others' perceptions and has been trying earnestly. This was a completely new dimension that I had never thought of. Rather than recognising him for his effort, I was quick to judge and made him feel like a disappointment. In many parent-teacher meetings, we have the child sitting next to us and continue reviewing his strengths and weaknesses. Would you, an adult, like it if someone examines you in that manner? The same goes for your child. We are quick to attach judgmental tags on our children and say things like "Ah, he is just lazy" or "She is very stubborn" to a neighbour or a friend. This further reinforces to the child that he is indeed so. Even while discussing the child with your spouse, do it in privacy in your child's absence.

4

TOUGH CONVERSATIONS:

Does this mean that if you observe your child lacking or failing in something, you should sweep it under the carpet and pretend that all is well? Certainly, not. It is in the child's best interest to not make a spectacle in front of others, but it is absolutely essential to deal with it on a one-on-one basis. The key here is to let him know that failure is a subjective view. No one can be good at everything and it's important for your child to understand that, so a few failures do not alter his self-esteem. But if your child is failing in something that he is good at, due to lack of trying, it is important for you to figure out why. If it's due to a laidback attitude, intervene to help him work out a disciplined routine. The child may have



also encountered a sensitive parental response to a failure in the past and may then prefer to not even try. Assure the child of your love despite success or failure to get him into the comfort zone. Praise the effort, not the results.

5

AVOID COMPARISONS:

There is not a parent who does not know that comparisons are a strict no-no, but most fall into the trap. Your friend's one-year-old child has just started walking and your friend tells you

about that. You immediately answer with, "Great, but mine did not start walking until 15 months old." Despite the best intentions, it is hard to escape these tendencies. But, the least you can do is to be cautious enough to not do this before your child. Children also compare themselves with their buddies. "I need a race car just like the one he has", "My friend had a pizza party for her birthday, I want one too", are common quips. Discourage yours when he does that, but do not offer a counter response such as "There are many children

who don't even have food to eat." Remember, that is a comparison, too!

6

SUBTLE HINTS:

Watch out for the subtle hints you may be dropping. Imagine a scenario where you are expecting guests and you are in a hurry to wrap up the cooking. Your little one walks up to the kitchen. Not wanting to be disturbed, you retort with a "What do you want now? Can you go and play in your room?" You did not intend to be rude, but you have already



assumed that what your child has come to say is of less significance and your task is a higher priority. Repeated incidents like these could send strong signals about his self-worth. That's not to say that you need to drop everything and mollify him with excessive attention. In these situations it helps to imagine how you would talk to another adult. You would trust that they will understand your situation and so you could respond with, "I know you want to talk but I need to get this done before

the guests come. Can you wait until I finish so we can talk at leisure?"

7 ENGAGE HIM: One of the most effective ways to build self-esteem in a child is to get him to do things along with you. Take him out for a walk. Share your day's experiences with him. Most of what you do in your day remains a mystery to your child. Sharing about what you do, who you meet, how you react to situations can

make him feel very special. Ask him for help with things around the house. "Can you hold this frame while I fix the nail?" "Can you add salt to this dough?" A few simple things like these can make him feel involved. Ask for advice. Bouncing off a problem with him will help him build his self-esteem and think through the pros and cons of it. Take his choice into account. Deepa, mum to seven-year-old Shravan, recalls, "For his fourth birthday, he wanted a raincoat, but when his dad and I visited the shop, we did not like the design and bought him a scooter instead. When we returned home, Shravan was inconsolable because he was eagerly waiting for the raincoat. The scooter was five times the cost of the raincoat, so we assumed we were buying something better. But he did not look at it that way."

8 PARENTS AS ROLE MODELS: Children imitate their parents, so a child's self-esteem can inevitably be a shadow of the self-esteem that the parents carry. Children of those with low self-esteem often find them making self-deprecating remarks that stick in the minds of the little ones. So, as much as you focus on your child, make sure you are in a good space too. Also, sparring couples do not help, as children get caught in the verbal duels, which also intensify their sense of insecurity. Sometimes, you may end up hurting your child by paying less attention or saying something hurtful when angry. As a parent, you may justify it as one-off outburst, but it could contribute to your child feeling less worthy or worse, he may feel it is fine to hurt someone else. Face it head-on with your child – "Hey, you know, how I yelled at you in the morning while I was working? I realise I should not have talked to you like that."

so sorry and won't do that again." These words emphasise your child's feelings are important to you and you are also giving a valuable lesson on how to deal with it when you end up hurting someone.

9 BUT REMEMBER, THE WORLD CAN BE MEAN:

Now, this is not an easy one to tackle. As much as you strive to condition the right environment for your tiny tot, there is little influence you have on how the world behaves. A nasty remark from a friend or an outsider can dampen your child's spirits. It is tough to deal with, but there is no substitute to conversations and role modelling. Give your child examples and share your own experiences, but do not intervene on his behalf or spoonfeed him. Help him see the other person's view point and get him to accept that people can be rude at times and may not mean it.

Parenting is usually about being instinctive and spontaneous, but when it comes to building your child's self-esteem, some careful thought and awareness can be very handy and give the results you want. It also helps for you and your partner to sit down and figure out what approach to take when. For example, in the case of handing out punishments such as timeouts or taking away a favourite thing, often couples tend to disagree on the methods and end up fighting with each other. There is also a more versus less dilemma, less attention can get your child to question self-worth and more attention could result in the child growing up to be a narcissistic individual. So, striking that right balance can only come when you consciously adopt a strategy. With some practice from your end, your child can bloom into an individual with high self-esteem.