

Improving Students' Self-Esteem

Using a 10-step system, teachers can help strengthen their students' self-esteem and increase their chances for success in life.

Teachers intuitively know that when kids feel better about themselves, they do better in school. The simple fact is, though, that youngsters today are not receiving enough positive, nurturing attention from adults, either at home or at school. The reasons are numerous and complex, but the result is that more and more students have low levels of self-esteem.

To raise the self-esteem of students, you must start with the school staff. The main way students learn is through modeling and imitation. If teachers have low self-esteem, they are likely to pass it on to their students. We must ensure, through preservice and inservice training, that teacher-student interactions are positive, validating, affirming, and encouraging.¹

The challenge facing schools is

great, but there are day-to-day things educators can do to increase children's self-esteem and, in so doing, improve their prospects for success (see "Does Self-Esteem Affect Achievement?"). I use a 10-step model to help students become winners in life.²

1. *Assume an attitude of 100 percent responsibility.* I introduce the following formula: E (events) + R (your response to them) = O (outcomes). When people don't get the outcomes they want, I urge them not to blame external events and other people but to take responsibility for changing *their* responses. For example, if I ask a class how many of them think it will raise Peter's self-esteem if I tell him he is the biggest idiot I ever met in my

Does Self-Esteem Affect Achievement?

Let's see what happens when a school makes a concerted effort in the area of self-esteem. One of the most detailed studies ever done was conducted by Gail Dusa (current president of the National Council for Self-Esteem) and her associates at Silver Creek High School in San Jose, California. (For more information, contact Gail Dusa, NCSE, 6641, Leyland Park Dr., San Jose, CA 95120.)

She divided the freshman class into three groups. The self-esteem group (93 students) was taught by teachers who adhered to three operating principles. They (1) treated all students with unconditional positive regard, (2) encouraged all students to be all they could be, and (3) encouraged all students to set and achieve goals. In addition, the group participated in a 40-minute activity to build self-esteem every second Friday throughout their freshman year. The control group (also 93 students) received no treatment but was monitored along with the self-esteem group for four years. The third group was not involved in the study. At the end of four years, Dusa's findings were as follows:

	<i>Self-Esteem Group</i>	<i>Control Group</i>
Days of absenteeism per semester	1	16
Percentage of students who completed 90 percent or more of their homework	75%	25%
Percentage of students who participated in 20 or more extracurricular activities	25%	2%
Percentage of class offices held by groups between freshman and senior years	75%	0
Percentage of students who graduated from high school	83%	50%

—Jack Canfield

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whole life, very few of them will raise their hands. I then tell them that it is not what I say to Peter but what Peter says to *himself* afterward that ultimately affects his self-esteem. If Peter says, "Mr. Canfield has only known me for a few days, how did he find out so fast?", his self-esteem will probably go down. But if he says to himself, "Mr. Canfield just picked me out for his example because he knows I can take a little kidding," then his self-esteem will not be damaged.

I also emphasize that we are responsible for our behavioral responses. For example, hit someone who yells at you, and you go to the principal's office. Respond with humor or by ignoring the person, and you stay out of trouble. Surprisingly, most kids don't understand that they have choices, let alone what those different choices are.

2. *Focus on the positive.* In order to feel successful, you have to have experienced success. Many students, because they feel they have never done anything successful, need to be coached. Often this is because they equate "success" with, say, winning a medal or getting rich. I spend a lot of time having students recall, write about, draw, and share their past achievements. With some probing and discussion, students often identify successful aspects of their lives that they have not recognized before.

3. *Learn to monitor your self-talk.* Each of us thinks 50,000 thoughts per day, and many of them are about ourselves. We all need to learn to replace

negative thoughts—I can't dance, I'm not smart, I don't like my face—with positive self-talk: I can learn to do anything I want, I am smart, I love and accept myself the way I am. I teach students to say, "Cancel, cancel," when they hear themselves or another person saying something negative about them and to replace the negative remark with a positive one. This technique takes time and practice, but it really makes a difference. Also, whenever others put them down, they are to repeat the following "antidote" sentence: "No matter what you say or do to me, I'm still a worthwhile person."

4. *Use support groups in the classroom.* It's possible for a kid to come to school for a whole day and never once be the center of positive attention.

"Sharing dyads" and "support groups" help overcome this alienation. Each day teachers might ask their students to find a partner (preferably a different partner each day) and then give them one or two minutes each of uninterrupted time to talk about a specific topic, for example, *Who is your best friend and why? What is your favorite thing to do on the weekend? If you won a million dollar lottery, what would you do with the money?* Topics such as these can also be discussed in "buddy groups" of six kids with three sets of buddies. Sometimes youngsters meet with their buddies and sometimes with their whole group. They learn that it is a positive, healing experience to talk about their feelings, and they become bonded to their fellow students.

Resources for Increasing Students' Self-Esteem

The Alliance for Invitational Education, Room 216, Curry Building, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC 27412. The alliance publishes a comprehensive newsletter on self-esteem and invitational education and sponsors one national conference and several regional conferences yearly.

The California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, 1130 K St., Suite 300, Sacramento, CA 95814. This 25-member task force was appointed by the California governor and legislature to determine how to raise the self-esteem of at-risk groups in the state. Hawaii, Maryland, and Virginia have also created or begun to create similar task forces. For a copy of California's final report, *Toward a State of Esteem* (January 1990), send \$4.50 to the Bureau of Publications, California State Department of Education, P.O. Box 271, Sacramento, CA 95802-0271. A 200-page *Appendix*, which includes an extensive bibliography on self-esteem and personal and social responsibility, is also available for \$7.50.

The Center for Self-Esteem, P.O. Box 1532, Santa Cruz, CA 95060; (408) 426-6850. The center sponsors an annual conference; publishes a free newsletter; distributes curriculums, books, and tapes; and provides consultants and workshop leaders.

The Foundation for Self-Esteem, 6035 Bristol Pkwy., Culver City, CA 90230; (213) 568-1505. The foundation has published *The GOALS Program*, a three-and-a-half hour video training program being used in adult schools, correctional facilities, and with welfare recipients. It also sponsors an annual conference, provides consultants and workshop leaders, and distributes curriculums, books, and tapes.

The National Council for Self-Esteem, c/o Gail Dusa, President, 6641 Leyland Park Dr., San Jose, CA 95120. The council publishes a newsletter and a resource packet and sponsors a national conference and about 20 regional conferences yearly. Write for a free copy of the newsletter and an information packet. Annual dues, \$25.

Self-Esteem Seminars, 6035 Bristol Pkwy., Culver City, CA 90230; (213) 337-9222. The organization conducts inservice training, offers an intensive Facilitators' Training Course, conducts weekend workshops for personal and professional growth, publishes a free quarterly newsletter, and offers a broad spectrum of books, tapes, and curriculum guides. Write for a free copy of their newsletter/catalogue.

5. *Identify your strengths and resources.* An important part of expanded self-esteem is the broadened awareness of one's strengths and resources. One technique is to have students in their support groups write down and tell each other what they see as their positive qualities and strengths. Because their assessments need to be realistic as well as positive, it is also important to help students note those areas that need more development if they are to achieve their goals.

6. *Clarify your vision.* Without a clear vision, there is no motivation. Questions such as the following help students clarify their visions: *If you had only one year left to live, how would you spend your time? If a genie granted you three wishes, what would you wish for? If you were guaranteed success in anything you attempted, and money were not a limiting factor,*

what would you do when you grow up? I also use extended guided visualizations in which students construct, for example, their "perfect life"—complete with their ideal house, job, and marriage partner—and share it with their support groups.

7. *Set goals and objectives.* Until our visions are broken down into specific and measurable goals—with timelines and deadlines—we are not likely to move forward very quickly. I teach students how to set measurable goals and objectives for self, family, school, and community. They then share their goals with the rest of the class, support one another as they work toward them, and celebrate any completed goals.

8. *Use visualization.* The most powerful yet underutilized tool in education is visualization. When we hold a clear vision of our goals as if they were already achieved, the action releases

creativity, increases motivation, and actually alters our perceptions of ourselves and our environments. I ask students to spend five minutes per day visualizing each of their goals and objectives as if it were already achieved. This can produce radical results very quickly.

9. *Take action.* To be successful, you yourself have to "do the doing." I often cite the following example: you cannot hire someone else to do your push-ups for you and expect to develop your muscles. I constantly work with students to stretch into more and more action steps—doing things they previously did not think possible.

10. *Respond to feedback—and persevere.* I try to inspire students with stories of people like themselves who have gone on to do great things, often by working against the odds; for example, Wilma Rudolph, the great track star who was told as a youth that she would never walk again. I show them how to use mistakes for growth, to employ positive as well as negative feedback to their advantage, and to persevere until they accomplish their goals.

When teachers use these 10 steps in their classrooms, the improvements in students' self-esteem and achievement are rewarding. A comment from a teacher who participated in one of my workshops sums up the dramatic change that can occur in a child's life:

I used to think all I needed to do was to teach mathematics well. Now I teach children, not math. . . . The youngster who really made me understand this was Eddie. When I asked him one day why he thought he was doing so much better than last year, he replied, "It's because I like myself now when I'm with you." □

¹For more information about raising the self-esteem of faculty in a school, contact the resources listed in the box on p. 49.

²The 10-step model is spelled out in greater detail and with many examples in *Self-Esteem in the Classroom: A Curriculum Guide*, which is available from the author at the address given below.

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