



Trauma
Care

Newsletter

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Self-Esteem & Labels

"Freak. Loser. Idiot. Geek."

These are just some of the ugly labels kids throw around every day at school. Chances are, your child has been called names even worse than these. The sad fact is that the more times your kid is called a hateful name, the more he'll start to believe it's true. This week, we discuss the dangers of kids using labels, and to hear why specialists believe your child's sense of identity is at the core of good self-esteem—and good behavior.



"Here's what every kid needs to learn: if you don't identify yourself and decide who you are, other people will do it for you."

The problem is that if a child hears names over and over again, he's going to begin to believe it. He buys into the label he's been given, ultimately acts it out and starts to perceive himself that way. Here's what every kid needs to learn: if you don't identify yourself—decide who you are—other people will do it for you. When kids get called a loser by a few people, they begin to believe they're losers—and then they start to act like losers. The thing is, just because you've failed doesn't mean you're a failure. I've been to Taco Bell, but that doesn't make me a taco. It's almost funny because of how ridiculous it is, but sadly, kids don't see the ridiculousness. They think, "Wow, I've failed two or three times at this; that must mean I'm a failure." But it doesn't mean they're a failure—it just means those times didn't go as well. So instead of caving in and saying "Screw it; I'm a loser," what your child needs to say is, "Well, this is how I can approach it differently next time." Or "I wasn't as prepared as I should've been. Next time I'll try harder." The trick is for your child to focus on how he can improve, instead of on giving up.

One of the things children do is to shut down. So many kids have these enormous brick walls built around themselves because they've been labeled. Often, they're just trying to protect themselves. Many lash out and bully others. Personally, I believe that if kids knew who they were and felt good in themselves, they wouldn't be bullies because there would be no need for it. When you bully others, what you're really trying to do is siphon some energy and self-esteem off of other people, because you yourself are lacking it in yourself.

I believe repetition and consistency is important. As often as possible, tell your child, “We believe in you; we see the best in you.” You never know when these words are needed and where they’re going to land. In fact, I believe it’s particularly important to be positive if you have a child who isn’t opening up to you. It’s never too late. However, understand that reaching that child is going to be that much harder.



You have a lot of barriers to break through and a lot of time that you’re trying to make up. You’re trying to break through a lot of hurt, and you might not know exactly what that hurt even is.

So it’s going to be more of a process for you as a parent to get through to a child who has already accepted defeat. Saying that, it’s not impossible. I’ve seen kids do complete turnarounds. It’s especially effective when they hear it from someone who’s been through it themselves. They start to realize, “Hey, if he can do it, I can do it—I can turn this around. It’s not too late. Forget what those other kids said about me. From now on, it’s going to be different.”

And that’s the key. The beauty of life is that you can wake up each day and decide exactly who you are. You can wake up and say, “You know what, I’m going to be a jerk. I’m going to believe that everybody has it out for me and I’m going to be defensive. I’m not going to meet new people and I’m not going to try new things, because there’s no point.” Or you can wake up and say, “All right, it’s a little bit scary, but I’m going to go out there and I’m going to be who I really am, not who others want me to be. I’m going to be open to opportunities and I’m going to be cool to people and treat them the way they should be treated. I’m going to listen and I’m going to try things and I’m going to do my best.” Every day you have that opportunity, so it’s never too late. Ultimately it comes down to a choice.

Let’s talk about words.

It’s actually rather astounding the level of power words have over us. One of the biggest lies that parents teach their children is the classic “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Sounds lovely until you’ve spent any time in junior high. Or on the Internet for that matter. Words can harm. Words can heal.

And words can utterly affect your life in ways you never anticipated.

Names, for example. Names have *power*. Names are our label, our *identity*. They define us.



Here's the thing: your name is part of your self-concept. No man is an island, nor do we develop in a background. Your self-concept – how you see and define yourself – is a composite, defined in no small part by how others interact with and react to you. As we grow and mature, we can control more of how others see us, but that is still defined by how *we see ourselves*. How we label ourselves, in fact.

We know instinctively the power of labels, which is why we fight over their definitions. Look at the ongoing attempts to define “Geek” and “Nerd”, for example. Call a self-professed geek a nerd and you'll be corrected immediately. Geeks are into genre fiction while nerds are into hard sciences and engineering. Nerds will call geeks dilettantes, geeks will insist that nerds are borderline Aspie cases who can't handle relationships with non-nerds, blog will be written and infographics drafted defining which attributes apply to which name, and everybody will agree that they're not dorks because who wants to be a dork?

Identity and Resistance To Change

One of the insidious things about accepting others' definitions of who we are into our self-concept is how difficult it can be to get rid of them.

After passively accepting certain labels into our identity, we begin to define ourselves by them and – by extension – accept them as part of our limitations, often without bothering to explore or examine them. Think about it: if you knew that aspects of who you are at this moment that were keeping you from achieving what you want, if they were negatively affecting your life, would you be willing to change them and reach your dreams or would you choose to keep them because you refuse to change who you are for the expectation of others? Change is hard. Change is scary. Change can be painful. But to quote a wise man: “Without pain, without sacrifice, we have nothing. What you're feeling isn't pain, it's premature enlightenment.”

During middle childhood, children's personal identity develops so as to become more complex, multi-faceted and abstract in nature. Children stop thinking of themselves solely as defined by singular and concrete attributes and comparisons

- "I'm a boy"
- "I have yellow hair"
- "I'm bigger than my baby sister"

and start to describe themselves more according to their perceived personality characteristics and psychological qualities

- "I'm funny"
- "I like to make other people laugh"
- "I like to help people."

As children develop a more complex picture of who they are and what they are capable of, they start to compare themselves to other people (e.g., peers, caregivers, siblings, other people in the community) across a wide variety of traits and characteristics such as appearance, intelligence, physical abilities, artistic abilities, etc.

A result of this growing complexity of self and other description is that children start to view themselves as more or less capable within different domains of accomplishment (academic, social, athletic, appearance, etc.). Their self-esteem - reflecting their feelings of personal worthiness - also starts to vary across these domains, with the result that children may see themselves as very capable in some areas but not in others. For example, a child might say "I'm better at art than Bobby, but he is a much better runner than I am!"

Children's overall self-esteem may fluctuate or decrease as they start this process of social comparison in earnest. However, with proper caregiver support and guidance, children's self-esteem will generally rise again during this period as children find and focus on their strengths, address their weaknesses, and recognize that their general acceptability to those they depend upon does not itself depend on their becoming perfect people. Of course, this process of self-esteem regulation does not happen for everyone, and some children will go on to develop quite negative self-images at this time.

What can a parent do

Self-identity is one of the trickier contributors to children's healthy development because you can't "do" things to your children to give them their self-identity. Rather, you can only create an environment that allows their self-identity to evolve naturally. A part of the environment that supports the emergence of culture and media, that aim to stunt, distort, or co-opt that self-identity.

Inoculate Your Children Against Media's Messages

You can help your children resist media's messages by priming them for those messages.

Emphasize Healthy Values

You should focus on healthy values that help shape your children's self-identities, for example, integrity, hard work, respect, responsibility, and compassion.

Highlight Your Children's Intrinsic Passions and Strengths

Media are telling your children that they should value themselves based on, for example, what they look like or what they have.

Keep Your Children Grounded in Reality

Your children are bombarded by messages and images from media that are entirely out of touch with reality (e.g., you can become rich and famous without any talent or effort). Yet, with persistent exposure, these unrealistic messages and images can become your children's reality and, by extension, an unhealthy influence on their self-identity.

Have Your Children Involved in Healthy Activities

The best way to keep your children away from unhealthy media influences is to keep them busy with healthy activities.

Walk the Walk on a Healthy Self-identity

If you fall prey to media's messages and you develop a "manufactured" identity, your children have little chance of developing their own healthy self-identity.

Create a Healthy Family Lifestyle

Your children will base much of their self-identity on their most immediate environment.

Surround Your Children With Healthy People

You can surround your children with healthy people in their immediate social world who support everything that goes into the development of a positive self-identity.

Talk and Listen to Your Children

Your children have a tremendous capacity to communicate with you about what is happening in their lives, both good and not so good.

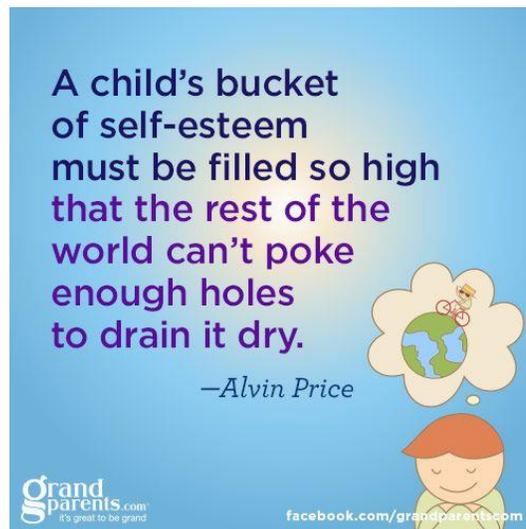
Focus on Others

The one form of externalization of self-identity that is healthy is when your children direct their focus and energies onto helping others. Healthy self-identity is built when your children are not preoccupied with themselves and experience the intrinsic rewards of improving the lives of others.

Something fun to do with your child...



I found a super fun, stimulating and activity book produced by a South African mom, Gail Venter, called 'Imagine your Life', this work book helps children discovery who they are and how special they are, visit the website and order the workbook. www.imagineyourlife.co.za



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