

# Instilling and Preserving Self-Esteem in Your Children

**Tip** – Maintain a healthy balance between your expectations and your child's ability, age, and competence.

Self-esteem as a term has been so widely used and broadly interpreted that we almost don't know what it is anymore! Harriet Heath, Ph.D, developmental psychologist and author of *Using Your Values to Raise Your Child to Be an Adult You Admire*, defines self-esteem succinctly: It is feeling good about oneself or holding oneself in high regard. The essence of self-esteem is not knowledge of facts or possession of particular skills, rather, according to Heath, it is an attitude toward the self and it grows in childhood as a child experiences that he or she is valued.

Although self-esteem is defined simply, it is achieved and preserved in a more complex way.

Self-esteem is connected to two separate areas within a child. One is an inner core of trust that a baby develops by having her needs met routinely – a strong feeling of self-worth originates here. The second area is the child's competency – when she is old enough, she becomes aware of herself as a person and judges her own abilities. Self-esteem is deeply entwined with her sense of self-worth and her sense of competency; both are critical to healthy self-esteem.



**Tools** – Parents can instill and encourage good self-esteem in their children by meeting their needs and by setting realistic expectations for their behavior. The following guidelines, based on age level, are drawn from *Using Your Values*.

- **Baby.** You build the foundation for self-esteem in infancy by treasuring your baby and routinely meeting his needs. In this way, he begins to build trust and learns that he is worthy of having his needs met.
- **Toddler.** The most significant ways to build a toddler's self-esteem are to support his need to explore, keep him safe, and talk with him about his experiences. These things add to his self-worth and encourage his sense of competence.
- **Preschool.** Set reasonable, age-appropriate expectations. Refrain from labeling him negatively: "lazy," "stupid," or "dumb." Instead, label the behavior; for example, "You seem to be feeling lazy today."
- **School-age.** Again, set reasonable expectations. Be aware that the school experience can undermine self-esteem, especially if your child has a learning disability – support your child, if this is the case. Peers can also tear away at self-esteem. Put-downs are rampant in our culture; help him to identify them, analyze them, and speak up against them.

