

## Generating Self-Esteem in Children

Thomas P Millar BA MD CM FRCP(C) Child Psychiatry

*Original article edited for web publication by Laura Millar, October 2010*

---

Parents are still being fed a lot of bad advice about child rearing these days. Before you take any parenting book seriously look for answers to these two questions.

1. Is the author a fully trained and widely experienced professional with respect to the psychological development of children?
2. What does the author think parenting is all about?

You may have trouble figuring these things leafing through the pages in a bookstore, so here's a shortcut that usually works. Look in the index for an entry under self-esteem. Read the referred passage. If the author believes self-esteem is generated solely by parental approval, if she he or she is developmentally naïve. Don't buy the book.

Parents would love to be able to give their child self-esteem. I hear it all the time. "If I just help him to like himself, I know it would make all the difference." And they have tried. The books tell them to "look for something to praise" and so they have offered praised for such minimal performance that praise itself has lost all meaning for the child.

Teachers try too. They give the child easy work to do, so he will have a little success. He soon sees he is being asked to do less than the others, and he takes this as confirmation that he is dumb.

The fact is, self-esteem is self-approval not external approval. It is built brick by brick, and the architect is the child himself. All a parent can do is lead the child to the building site, but parents cannot do the building. In order to make it clear how this building takes place. let me show an example of successful training that leads to self-esteem.

When the child is old enough to learn to tie his shoes, most mothers present him with the task using words such as these: "Now we are going to learn to tie shoes."

The first time he picks up the laces, he says, "I can't. My fingers are too dumb. You do it for me."

The right answer is, "Sure you can. I'll show you how." Mother takes the laces, draws them across one another, and says. "First you make the X. See the X? Now you make an X." He does.

"Now you stick one end of the lace through the bottom of the X. Like this. Pull both ends, and the job is done." He tries but fumbles a bit.

"OK. I'll finish this one." She ties the shoe for him. "Today you learned to make the X. Tomorrow we'll practice pulling the bottom end through."

Tomorrow he starts with, "I can't. It's too hard. You do it for me."

"Sure. Making the X is cinchy. See?" Now you make one. Good."

"I made the X, didn't I?"

“Yes you did. Now we got to push this end through the back there. Here it comes, grab it with your other hand. Don’t let it escape.”

“Now you’ve got one hand on this lace, and one on the other, just slowly pull them away. See? They are making the first half of a knot.”

“I don’t think they like being a knot. They’re kind of loosening up.”

“You’ve got to pull the reins a little. Good. Now I’ll finish this knot and we’ll try making another first half on the other shoe.”

The next day when mother says it is shoe tying time, he complains a little, but soon mother has him making the cross, pulling the back end through, and seeing the first half of the knot appear. “Now we make a loop, like this one, see. You’ve got to hold it at the bottom so it stays a loop. Laces are kind of lazy you know, and if you don’t keep a tight grip on them they just slop all over the place. Good, that’s a good loop. Now I’ll do the wrap around and finish this one so we can make a loop on the second shoe.”

Bit by bit she leads him through the task, not giving up because she’s in a hurry or because he claims his fingers are tired. Ten mornings of this and guess what? He manages the whole job himself.

That night, when Dad comes home, he rushes to greet him. “You know what, Dad? I can tie my shoes!”

That joyous tone in his voice is the sound of one brick of self-esteem settling solidly into place.

There are many, many little tasks of early childhood, each of which provided an opportunity for a little brick laying on his house of self-esteem.

Teach a child to dress by himself and when he finally comes up to that expectation he will declare with pride: “Hey, Mom. You notice I always get dressed in the morning myself?”

Each reasonable expectation met, brings the child an experience of mastery. Experiences of mastery carry with them a special feeling. The famous French developmental psychologist Piaget called that feeling “joy in being a cause.” Such experiences help the child to accept his childhood.

Let me close with another illustration, from my own practice. An adaptively immature six year old I began seeing in my office turned every session into a power struggle filled with great declaration of his personal power. Without rubbing his nose in it, I struggled back.

“I’m the boss of my parents, you know,” he would tell me when I made it clear things were different with me. But at the same time I was leading his parents to playful firmness about a few things only: one was going to bed on time and another was tying his shoes.

Things began settling down in the office. Then one day he came in, gave me one of his chubby little smiles, and said, “Well, Dr Millar. I guess you’re right. I’m not the boss of my parents.” He looked briefly woebegone then brightened up and said, “But guess what I can do? I can tie my shoes all by myself.”

Self-esteem is not something you give a child. But you can put him in the way of acquiring it, The trick is to make sure he copes with each little growing up task that is set before him.

*For more practical parenting guidance, see The Omnipotent Child and Rearing the Preschool Child; information about both titles is available at [www.omnipotentchild.com](http://www.omnipotentchild.com).*