

## Six Myths About Self-Esteem

Karen Owens, Ph. D.  
College of Lake County

### Abstract

Self-esteem has been targeted as being responsible for children's mediocre performances in academic, social, and moral areas. What many have come to believe about self-esteem, however, is known as "feel-good" self-esteem. This view of self-esteem has given us a deceptive, one-sided view of self-esteem and is responsible for perpetrating a number of myths which are discussed and dispelled in this paper. The more dynamic component of self-esteem, inner self-esteem, based on children's actual competencies, has been overlooked for decades. Inner self-esteem is enhanced by helping children develop the necessary skills to succeed in school and act in socially-competent and morally-responsible ways which leads to "competency-based" self-esteem. Competency-based self-esteem is enhanced by meeting challenging standards and expectations and by behaving in socially-valued ways.

### Six Myths About Self-Esteem

In a recent international study on math skills, American children ranked last on performance. When asked how they *felt* about their math abilities, they ranked first (LaPointe, Mead, & Askew, 1992). Results such as this have prompted a number of editorials, articles, and books analyzing the reasons for children's lackluster outcomes and inflated self-perceptions not only in academic but also in social and moral areas as well. What has been targeted as the culprit for children's less-than-adequate performance is self-esteem. As one syndicated columnist expressed it, "What would work better for this country is to forget about self-esteem" (Leo, 1996, p.25).

It isn't self-esteem, per se, that is the guilty party, but rather, our mania with helping children feel loved and worthy, which gave birth to and nurtured "feel-good" self-esteem. Focusing only on this source of self-esteem has given us a distorted, often deceptive view of self-esteem, and is responsible for sustaining a number of myths surrounding self-esteem.

#### Myth One: Feeling Loved And Worthy Is *The* Source Of Self-Esteem

There are two components of self-esteem initially described by prominent sociologists, Cooley (1909) and Mead (1934). The reflective, outer component derives from feeling loved and worthy; the active, inner source is based on children's actual competencies.

Children learn to evaluate themselves by their perceptions of the way others evaluate them, in Cooley's terms, the looking-glass self. Parents, teachers, and significant others become the social mirrors into which children look for information that comes to define the self. The outer

source of self-esteem is enhanced by adults helping children feel loved and worthy, providing firm but fair rules, and treating them with respect (Coopersmith, 1967). For the past several decades, the outer source of self-esteem is the predominant component recognized in definition and measurement and in programs designed to enhance it. The byproduct of this one-sided emphasis is feel-good self-esteem - helping children feel loved

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4 and worthy without any achievement necessary on their part (Lerner, 1996).

#### Feel-Good Self-Esteem

The loved-and-worthy component of self-esteem is the only source now recognized by most parents, educators, and therapists (Lerner, 1996). It is the sole focus of the majority of the 350 self-esteem programs designed to enhance it (Beane, 1991; Crisci, 1986), and which have been less than successful in achieving their desired goal (Phelan, 1996). Some self-esteem exercises involve having students sit in a circle and talk about how much they like themselves for fifteen minutes one day a week. Another exercise is called "Fishing for Compliments." Children, in groups of five or six students, are each given a piece of paper and they put their name on top. The children then exchange the papers and each child writes a compliment for the person whose name appears at the top. At the end of the exercise, children are asked, "How does it feel to receive so many compliments?" Further, self-esteem signs are liberally placed around classrooms to enhance children's evaluations of self: "Don't rate yourself on your

behavior; we love you no matter what." "You're wonderful just the way you are."

It is apparent from these activities that feel-good self-esteem advocates emphasize that self-esteem influences behavior and it is something that we (parents and teachers, for example) give to children. Self-esteem, feel-good proponents suggest, is enhanced by praising and protecting children. To this end, we have read, and subsequently came to believe, that children need to be supplied with generous doses of praise, irrespective of whether or not they have done anything to deserve these warm accolades (Sykes, 1995). Similarly, it has been advocated that children's self-esteem needs to be protected, and thus, in the academic domain, standards and expectations have been lowered and easy-to-achieve goals have been established (Damon, 1995). The feel-good approach is to skip over the hard work of changing children's actions and instead just let children *think* they are smart, nice,

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and kind (Zinsmeister, 1996).

### Competency-Based Self-Esteem

Feel-good self-esteem has been the dominant orthodoxy for so long that few are aware of the second, more dynamic and potent source of self-esteem discussed by Cooley (1909) and Mead (1934) - inner self-esteem. This component was dropped from the self-esteem equation during the Narcissistic Sixties and has been ignored ever since. Inner self-esteem is based on children's actions, skills, and behaviors. It derives from children's

sense of efficacy in mastering their environment and arises in connection with active striving. Focusing on enhancing inner self-esteem leads to competency-based self-esteem. Competency-based self-esteem builds from teaching children the necessary skills that will enable them to earn good grades, get along with others, and act in kind and decent ways towards others.

The competency-based perspective of self-esteem stresses that behavior has a strong influence on self-esteem; it is something that is earned and not instantly given; and is based on children's self-evaluations.

Competency-based self-esteem develops from meeting realistically-established, challenging standards, expectations, and goals, and by behaving in socially-valued ways. As a result of ignoring this source of self-esteem, we have large numbers of children who feel good about themselves even though they cannot read, write or spell or act in socially- and morally-responsible ways (Sykes, 1995). In short, today's children feel great without necessarily being great.

#### Myth 2: Self-Esteem Influences Behavior

Children who do well in school, are popular and respectful of others, all appear to have something in common - high self-esteem. Thus, it was presumed by feel-good advocates that if children are encouraged to feel better about themselves that their school work and behavior would improve. Lerner (1996) noted that feel-good self-esteem advocates maintain that "self-esteem is the critical variable for intellectual development - the master key to learning" (p.9).

Children cannot achieve until their self-esteem is raised.

Numerous authorities have stressed the importance of self-esteem and school achievement maintaining that self-esteem influences achievement (Beane & Lipka, 1984; Chapman, 1988; Harter, 1983; Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988). The majority of these studies, however, are correlational and the relationship between self-esteem and achievement is consistently low. The most universally reported finding is that "the associations between self-esteem and its consequences are mixed, insignificant or absent" (Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989, p. 15).

The few studies that have tried to establish self-esteem as causally predominant over achievement have usually concluded that self-esteem is mainly an outcome of achievement, not a cause (Calysn, 1971; Hoge, Smit, & Crist, 1995). Moreover, evidence is mounting that behavior influences self-esteem and that self-esteem is not a precondition for succeeding in academic, social, and moral areas, but a product of it (Bunker, 1991; Cohen & Westhues, 1995; Mone, Baker, Douglas, & Jefferies, 1995; Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995).

### Myth 3: The Opinion Of Others Is *The* Substance Of Self-Esteem

As a result of only emphasizing Cooley's looking-glass self, many have come to believe that the opinion of others is the sole source of self-esteem.

Research tells us, however, that self-esteem is based on *self*-evaluations. Gecas and Schwalbe (1986), for example, have demonstrated that there is little evidence that children's views of themselves are shaped solely by the opinion of others. In fact, data suggest that children rely more on their direct actions and their self-evaluations of those actions in determining how

smart, and socially and morally competent they are (Felson, 1985). As Bandura (1977) commented, people derive much of their knowledge (about themselves) from direct experiences of the effects produced by their own actions.

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Similarly, Cooley (1909) suggested, individuals must feel that the final arbitrator is within and not outside of them, and we can help children do that by teaching them appropriate skills. Cooley was not suggesting that children should totally discount the evaluations of others. Children's self-esteem should not be so mercurial, however, that they become chameleons, taking on the drab or bright colors of others' negative and positive responses to them. Competency-based self-esteem is more stable because it has a solid base in the child's demonstrated proficiencies and sure knowledge of past achievements, and thus, someone cannot instantly take it away.

#### Myth 4: Self-Esteem Is Something That Is Given To Us By Others

During infancy and toddlerhood, children need to be provided with a warm environment that unconditionally provides love and security. During the early years of life, Cooley's and Mead's first source of self-esteem plays a significant role in developing healthy self-esteem in children. As children get older, however, authentic self-esteem derives from children developing competencies in academic, social, physical, and moral areas (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986). As children progress through early childhood, the second, inner component of self-esteem takes on greater importance and needs to



be incorporated into children's self-pictures (Hales, 1985). Children need to move from "I am special because I am me" to "I am special because I am competent and capable."

In other words, self-esteem is no longer given to children, but rather, *self-esteem must be earned*. This is not to say that adults no longer play an important role in enhancing children's self-esteem. The emphasis of their efforts, however, needs to incorporate skill building within the context of a warm and nurturing environment. Children who continue to receive generous supplies of approval and recognition, without doing much to earn them, will enjoy an agreeable level of self-esteem, provided they never enter a harsher environment. But, children do enter harsher environments and an inflated sense of self-esteem will not be

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supported by others later on.

#### Myth 5: Giving Generous Supplies of Praise Enhances Children's Self-Esteem

"You're such a good boy. You're such a wonderful little girl." Parents and educators believe that words of praise will foster positive self-esteem in children. Praise is generally ineffective for several reasons. Children will reject praise if the comments made are inconsistent with their self-pictures.

Sarah, for example, doesn't feel good about herself academically and believes that her teacher doesn't like her. As a result, she will only "see" those aspects in her environment that fortify this negative evaluation of self. She only notices and dwells upon assignments in which she has done

poorly; she only notices when the teacher doesn't call on her or when she doesn't pick Sarah as a team captain and fails to notice it when her teacher does. Perception is highly subjective and is always consistent with children's self-evaluations (Rogers, 1961).

Like Sarah, children have a strong tendency to defend their self-evaluations and are apt to blot out any positive messages about their own competence if such messages are in conflict with an unfavorable picture of self. For this reason, telling Sarah "You're such a smart girl and you can do much better" will not be effective. Individuals who believe that they are incapable or unattractive will cling to perceptions that bolster this unflattering picture and reject any suggestions that they may be capable or attractive. Furthermore, praise is ineffective because children have not necessarily done anything to earn these compliments; and, most importantly, they have not been taught the behavior and skills that they need in order to feel positive about themselves.

Finally, while younger children tend to behave in ways that will bring them rewards and avoid punishment, with development, children shift away from this orientation and gradually develop inner controls and behave in socially-approved ways because they want to, not necessarily to receive a reward. Therefore, rewards, in the form of praise, may be more

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effective in shaping the behavior of young children and not too effective with older children.

Children need to receive encouragement rather than praise. This is

praise: "You did a good job. What a great student you are. You're mommy's little helper." This is encouragement: "You are reading many words now. You picked up your toys and went to bed on time. You went from a C+ to an A- in English this year." Praise bestows external values for external qualities. Encouragement acknowledges effort while leaving appraisal to the child. Praise is broad and general "You are a good and worthy person." Encouragement is specific and focuses on a particular demonstrated behavior, and is always more effective than praise.

Common sense may tell us that teaching children the appropriate skills, rather than praise and self-esteem exercises, is a better way to enhance performance; fortunately research tells us this as well. To illustrate, an exhaustive review of different classroom programs under "Project Follow-Through" tracked 7,000 children at 139 schools across the United States and reported that the educational models focusing on self-esteem resulted in lower academic scores than any other model evaluated. In contrast, the instructional methods that produced the best student performances stressed effective *teaching of academic skills* and made no attempt to enhance self-esteem (except for rewarding good work) (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1992). Skills training has beneficial and lasting effects on children's school performance, peer acceptance, and moral behavior (Calsyn & Kenny, 1983; Mize & Ladd, 1990; Rosenberg, 1989).

#### Myth 6: Self-Esteem is Strengthened By Giving Children the "Warm Fuzzies" and Avoiding the "Cold Pricklies"

Schools have become obsessed with feel-good self-esteem believing that each child is entitled to success no matter what and that every child needs to win and all deserve rewards. The assumption that teachers must

always act to protect children's self-esteem from injury is

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believed to be just as important as praise in promoting self-esteem. After all, so the myth perpetuates, if positive self-esteem is the essential ingredient for strong academic performance, then anything and everything that could damage children's self-esteem, however slight or transient the injury, is educationally counterproductive and should be eliminated. Grades in some schools have been abolished and replaced with final marks such as "developing" or "becoming." Parents believe in protecting their children's self-esteem as well and may angrily admonish the teacher for giving their child a "C," even if it's deserved, because that will bruise their child's self-esteem.

Several educational reforms, such as watered-down curricula, inflated grades, and the end of ability grouping have been adopted in order to make children more equal, and thus, preserve their self-esteem (Sykes, 1995). These policies have not brought the desired results; as standards and expectations are lowered we are witnessing a corresponding drop in children's academic performances (International Comparative Studies in Education, 1995) rendering support that giving children the warm fuzzies and avoiding the cold pricklies not only is ineffective, but also damaging to children as well. Competency-based self-esteem, that is, helping children acquire the skills and proficiencies that will enable them to meet high standards and expectations, is more effective (Baumeister, 1996).

## Competency-Based Self-Esteem

Self-esteem research has dispelled many myths about self-esteem; yet, our *modus operandi* has been to follow the dogma of feel-good self-esteem.

Healthy self-esteem cannot be supported by approval from parents or sustained by arbitrary praise and acceptance. Children must work for self-worth. There is no gene cluster that propels some children to high and others to low self-esteem. Self-esteem is learned. One of the most important things that adults can do for children is to know what skills they need to learn and how they can constructively teach children these skills (Owens, 1995). All normal children are capable of

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learning academic skills that will enable them to perform to the best of their abilities in school; social skills that afford acceptance of and by others; and moral skills that enable them to respect themselves and others.

While space does not permit a detailed explanation of what skills children need to learn and effective ways of teaching children these skills, a brief example for each of the self-esteem domains will, hopefully, illuminate how self-esteem, from a competency-based perspective, is enhanced. Academically, children need to develop an inner locus of control (Rotter, 1966). Children need to learn that they are responsible for their own actions; those who have this attitude are more active in school activities and receive higher grades (Ichikawa, 1986). An effective way of helping children develop an internal attitude of control is through the use of natural consequences. For example, at school, children may not attend soccer practice until their math assignment is complete; at home, clothes left on

the floor will not be washed. Natural consequences show children that the world responds in an orderly fashion to their actions.

Socially, children need to be taught the skills that will enable them to cooperate, share, communicate, listen, deal with conflict, and become less egocentric and more sociocentric. "Coaching" is a successful way to help children acquire these skills (Mize & Ladd, 1990). In helping children develop ways of behaving that will promote peer acceptance, parents and educators act as coaches. They target a particular social skill, such as communicating with others, and teach the child important aspects of communicating, beginning, perhaps, with what to say when entering a group. Coaches assist children by telling them why this skill is important, provide them with suggestions on how to behave, try out role-playing sessions, and assess the situation afterward.

Becoming a good and decent person involves children developing sensitivity and concern for others: in other words, having a sense of empathy. Adults' validating children's own

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feelings helps them learn empathy. Teaching empathy is also a matter of reinforcing a certain perspective on good deeds. If, to illustrate, the child does something nice for a friend, instead of commenting, "What a good little boy you are for sharing your toy," ask the child to connect his sharing the toy with how good he has made the other child feel.

Fostering competency-based self-esteem does not mean that every child must be the straight-A, Ivy-League bound, homecoming king or queen

who receives the Good Samaritan award every year. Similarly, children do not have to be brilliant or exceptionally talented. It does mean that children master competent ways of behaving, strive to be the best they can be, and take pride in their accomplishments, and parents, teachers, and concerned adults can't ask for anything more than that.

Self-esteem was once the *sine qua non* for helping our children become productive and successful. Now the pendulum has swung to the other side with disgruntled adults calling for its demise. This again reflects our myopic view of recognizing only feel-good self-esteem and is reminiscent of throwing the baby out with the bath water. What would work best for our country is to forget about feel-good self-esteem. Children will eventually find out that it has all been a fraud because healthy self-esteem cannot be supported or sustained by praising and protecting them. Stable self-esteem develops through helping children be, and subsequently feel capable, not the other way around. Thus, we need to accentuate mastery-oriented, performance-related, competency-based self-esteem and emphasize self-esteem as a byproduct of *real* achievement. Authentic self-esteem must be accompanied by accomplishments and personal qualities or it is counterfeit and meaningless.

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Dr. Karen Owens is on the faculty of The College of Lake County in Grayslake, Illinois.

She is also the author of Raising Your Child's Inner Self-Esteem (1995).

Correspondence

with Dr. Owens may be addressed:

The College of Lake County

Social Science Division

19351 Washington

Grayslake, IL 60030