

Self Concept: It's More Complex Than We Thought

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If parents are asked what topic that they would be most interested in learning more about, it would be self-concept. It is an important topic, and it is a concept about which parents are concerned. Parents associate a strong self-concept and strong self-esteem with all sorts of good outcomes. When the research about self-concept is explored, it turns out that the relationship between good outcomes and self-concept is complex. The relationship between good outcomes and self-concept is not a simple one.

The research and the theoretical discussions about self concept suggest that there may be a global self concept, a general idea that people have about themselves; and in addition, there are multiple aspects of self concept or more specific self concepts that each person develops. A related concept is self-esteem, and we should distinguish between self-concept and self esteem briefly even though the terms are used interchangeably.

Self-Concept refers to the general idea we have about ourselves that comes from beliefs, attitudes and opinions about ourselves that are developed overtime. Self-concept has to do with how children think about themselves. Self esteem has to do with the feelings we associate with ourselves or how we feel about ourselves and how we value ourselves. Self-esteem has to do with how children feel about themselves. Children, who have good or solid self-esteem, also have clear unambiguous self-concepts.

If we think of self-concept as both general and specific, we ought to list what we mean by specific self-concepts particularly as they relate to children. Children then have a general self-concept, but they also have a physical self-concept that might relate to what they look like or what kinds of clothes they wear, and what kind of neighborhood and home they live in. Children have a social self-concept that relates to how they relate to other children and adults. They have an academic self-concept that relates to how well they think that they can learn, perhaps to how well they think that they do in school. And there are other self-concepts that have to do with family, beliefs, and other things. Even these self-concepts can be further differentiated. Academic self-concept for example includes how a child thinks that they do in each of the content areas such as math, reading, social studies or science. Each area is like a pyramid with more, and especially specific self-concepts, developing as a person encounters new experiences and develops new competencies. Self-concept and self-esteem are developed for specific behaviors and traits.

How does self-concept develop in children?

Self-concept increases in complexity as children grow. Preschoolers, at least those nearing age five, are able to understand that children differ in their abilities. They notice that some children do things very well, and others seem to have less competence in some areas.

Very young children describe themselves in quite concrete ways. They also tend to view themselves as very competent. Children may say, "I can run fast".

"I can name seven different kinds of dinosaurs." "I can jump a mile." As children get older, for example when they reach middle childhood, they tend to describe themselves using traits such as 'smart' or 'beautiful' or 'athletic'.

The Egocentrism of Preschoolers

Preschoolers have very high self-esteem because they are egocentric. They overestimate their competence because they don't consider the difficulty of a given task. When they are very successful on a given task they think that they are very capable, even if the task is too easy for them. The fact that the task is too easy is not considered.

Preschoolers do understand that a task can be difficult. They think that if they worked hard they must be very capable. Hard work equals high ability so that if they are successful on a task that took a long time or is physically tiring, even though it isn't at all mentally difficult, a preschooler will feel very capable.

Preschoolers ignore failure. If they fail at something, they discount it. They only remember the successes. This is very egocentric of course, but it allows young children to develop high self-esteem. This same egocentric ability allows preschoolers to incorporate the opinion of someone they agree with, in the sense that if one person says they performed well and several say that they did not perform well, they can ignore the negative opinions.

Does Self-Esteem Decrease Over Time?

For a long time we thought that self esteem decreased as children got older, because studies that measure self esteem found that this was the case as children went through school, until about grade 10 when self esteem appeared to increase again. Today we don't think that self esteem actually decreases, but rather, that self-esteem is quite inflated and unrealistic in preschoolers.

Children do not seem to compare themselves to others in order to see if their inflated self-perceptions are correct until about the second grade. As children get older, their understandings of their strengths and weaknesses tend to fit what teachers and others say about them, and the feedback that they get when they perform in various areas such as in sports.

Does Self-Esteem Effect Positive or Negative Outcomes?

Parents are interested in self-concept and self esteem because they associate high self-esteem with a high level of school performance, success in sports and with popularity. Research does not support the this direct or tight connection between self-concept and positive make >

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any difference, in how children perform in school. Looking at it the other way around, there is no research to support the idea that improving academic skills will improve self-esteem.

In addition, research suggests that aggressive behavior and drug use is not the result of low self esteem. We had thought that children with high self-esteem would be prosocial, that they would help others or do positive things for others. This is not the case either. There is little evidence that low self esteem CAUSES any problems at all especially the problems we have associated with self esteem such as: low grades, aggression, delinquency, dropping out of school or poor peer relationships.

Is High Self-Esteem Always Good?

We think of a high self-concept as 'good' and a low self-concept as 'bad'. It just may be that children who have lower self concepts are more realistic judges of their own behavior, and are better able to self assess their performance accurately than their highly confident peers.

In fact, high self-esteem can be a problem. Bullies have high self-esteem. Aggressive children can feel very good about themselves, and can feel socially supported. Unrealistically high self-esteem contributes to the denial of negative behaviors. It supports a child blaming others and refusing to think that the problems that occur might be his fault. When school programs are run to help bullies, one measure of success is whether or not the self-esteem of these aggressive children is lowered, not increased.

Academic Self Concept

Parents care about self-concept for several reasons. One reason, is that they care about how their children will do in school and we had thought that self esteem and school performance were connected. The relationship between self-concept or self-esteem and success is complex as stated earlier. General self-concept and nonacademic self-concept are not related to academic success or academic failure. Academic self-concept is however, related to academic success at least moderately. What does matter is subject specific self-concept. Math self-concept for example is highly related to success in math.

Expectations

There are two additional factors that parents should understand. One has to do with expectations and the other has to do with attributions. Expectations have to do with what a child has learned is important to their parents. Expectations can be set too high for some children so that the child learns to expect more than she can achieve. When the child is unable to reach those high expectations, the child may not be willing to risk trying.

Some underachievers are internally pressured children, whose goals are so high that they cannot possibly be reached. They learn that no matter how hard they try, they still can't reach the levels that they expect. They learn that that can't achieve even if they do try. These children have never learned how to cope with defeat.

Attributions

Self-concept has to do with attributions. Attributions have to do with what children say or think to themselves, when they do something. Even very young children, as young as five years old, learn to say to themselves "I did well because I am smart (or fast, or strong)" and "I didn't do well because I

had bad luck (or the other kid threw the ball badly)." This is egotistical thinking again. Self-concept is built by how children explain their behavior by attributing their behavior to internal causes such as effort or ability, or to external causes such as bad luck or someone else made an error or the sky is falling. Whether a child attributes his behavior to internal or to external causes makes a difference.

Social Self Concept

Parents also want their children to have lots of friends or to be liked. Just as children tend to explain academic and sports success as related to internal or to external causes, they also explain social success, or failure, to internal or to external causes.

Children who explain social success or failure as due to internal causes are said to have an internal attributional style. These children will believe that trying hard such as behaving in a friendly way, is related to ones' ability or ease in talking with popular peers.

How does Attributional Style this Effect Social Self-Concept?

When a child explains to herself that being left out is due to low social ability, it has a strong effect on social self-concept. The child who explains being left out to low effort also has his self-concept effected but not as strongly.

If a child attributes being left out to bad luck which is an external attributional style, social self-concept is not strongly effected. In general, children who are often left out tend to think that they have low ability to be friendly and that this results in negative outcomes. If you feel very strongly that you have low ability, it is hard to try, and you may believe that even if you do try, you will fail.

Children are not all the Same

There is something else to consider. Researchers who have observed children interacting with their peers categorize them according to how successful they are when interacting. Most children are average. A small group of children are highly popular, while some outright rejected by other children. The rejected children tend to be aggressive and difficult to play with for that reason. There are two more categories of children. Some children are neglected. Neglected children aren't particularly disliked, they are just ignored by their peers. The final group is called controversial by researchers because they have characteristic of popular children and characteristics of rejected children. Some children like them very much and other children dislike them very much.

If we look at global self-concept, you would expect that the popular children have the highest self-concepts and this is the case. You might expect the rejected children to have the lowest self concepts and you would be correct. The children, who are average, neglected and controversial have global self-concepts that are 'ok'. If you look at social self-concept, you again would expect that that the popular children would have strong social self-concepts and the rejected children would have low social self-concepts and you would be correct. >

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The neglected children have lower than average social self-concepts even though their global self-concepts are intact. Controversial children surprisingly have very strong social self concepts, just as strong as the popular children. They have lower academic self concepts than the popular students however. The rejected children have significantly lower physical self concepts. They do not feel competent or attractive in this area. Popularity in children is associated with physical attractiveness and athletic skills.

How Can Parents Strengthen Children's Self Esteem?

Years ago, parents felt that if they praised children, children would grow up to be conceited which was considered a very unattractive trait. Parents over the years overreacted in disagreement with this idea, and today we see some parents praising children excessively for every little thing they do. This practice can have a negative effect in that children quickly figure out that that the flattering parent is not believable, and even that the message may be hiding something. Praise for success on easy tasks, lowers self-esteem. So flattery and excessive praise is not the way to build self-esteem in children.

Support is different from unrealistic praise. Children may feel competent in some areas but not others. They may feel competent on Monday on the ballpark, but not on Tuesday on the school playground. Parents can reassure children that they are supported and accepted by parents even when their peers do not support them.

Appreciation is different from praise. A parent can show appreciation by showing interest in the things that interests their child. Inviting a child to join in an activity in which the child shows interest is affirming and strengthens self worth.

Being given important or valued tasks that contribute to the family's functioning builds competence. Assistance in preparing meals in shopping, or in caring for animals, are 'real work' and help a child develop competence. Competence builds esteem. Making comments such as "You can do this when you stick to it" and "You seem to be good at solving problems" are the types of comments that help build self-esteem.

Helping children cope with defeats is absolutely critical to self-esteem. When a child is disappointed or stressed, a child needs support rather than denial that something happened that was not wonderful. Later the child needs strategies, through understanding what went wrong and how to fix it. Children need to know that their best performance can be satisfying, it is good enough.

Criticism is a very negative practice and has a strong effect on self-esteem. Instead, comparing a child's ability against what he or she did yesterday, did last time the child tried, or did in the past can be helpful. Children need to learn to judge improvement against a realistic standard.

As children grow, peers become increasingly important and success in the peer group to some degree, is critical in order for children to be happy. Parents can make sure that their children share their peer experiences by calmly listening and making a suggestion now and then. For some children, concrete and explicit suggestions may be needed about how to get to play with others. Building healthy relationships with peers is very important. At least one good friend is very important for strong self-esteem.

Modeling and direct teaching of children to reinforce themselves with positive self-statements, when they do something well, is very helpful in regard to academic and social self-concept development. You can teach this by asking how a child feels about a particular accomplishment when the child comes to you for praise. Instead of praising say "How do you feel about that?" After children learn to make positive self-statements that are on target, commenting on the self-statements is helpful "You must really feel good about that." This works with children as young as kindergarten age.

The discipline style of parents is important for building self-esteem. Children who are not disciplined do not develop strong self-esteem. Discipline and limit setting build self-esteem. Investigators of a recently published study at Case Western Reserve University suggest that parents concentrate on teaching self-control. Self-control predicts success over long periods of time and children with good self-control do well. These researchers see self control as the key variable in success rather than self esteem.

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