

Self-Esteem and the Child with Dyslexia

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One of the most basic human needs is self-esteem: the concept of love, approval, and acceptance of who we are.

It is critical to instill self-esteem in children with dyslexia because their confidence may be assaulted on many levels.

One important way a parent can foster self-esteem is through **empowering the child's thoughts and feelings.**

Feelings have a vital ecological purpose. They tell us what we like and don't like; how we want and need to be treated; and they let us know when there's danger. In other words, they teach us how to protect ourselves. If we're cut off from our feelings, we lose this cloak of protection. **Parents often inadvertently teach children not to respect their own feelings by issuing "shoulds" about them.**

A child who is told "You shouldn't hate your brother" or "You should be happy to visit your grandmother" will learn not to listen to his feelings, or worse, not to experience his feelings at all. If a child is taught that his feelings are bad or wrong, he will interpret that to mean that he is bad or wrong. Feelings don't necessarily need to be fixed, but they do need to be heard. **In the extreme, repressing feelings can create mental problems.** Conversely, when children's feelings are respected, they in turn learn to respect themselves. This breeds mental health and self-esteem.

Parents must differentiate, however, between feelings and behavior. It should be explained to a child, "If you hit somebody, you're doing something wrong; but it isn't wrong to feel so angry that you want to hit somebody."

Children rely on parents to set behavioral limits. They need to be taught to take responsibility for what they do with their feelings. It may be constructive to say to your child, "I understand you're angry with your brother. But you can't hit him. **Then suggest some acceptable ways of dealing with the anger.** For example, encourage your child to express his anger constructively by telling his brother why he's angry and how he'd like to be treated in the future. If feelings of anger persist, suggest other outlets: hitting a punching bag, going for a run, complaining to a friend or writing a letter."

And finally, explain to your child that if his brother doesn't honor his feelings or wishes, he has the power to create consequences. This gives the child essential feelings of having a degree of control over his life. For example, he doesn't have to share a particular toy if brother continually takes the toy apart and refuses to put it back together.

Parents also need to honor a child's thoughts. **Self-esteem is enhanced when a child believes that his/her thoughts are being heard and considered.** At the same time, parents need to remain honest. If you agree with your child, say so. If you disagree, do so respectfully. For example, you might say, "I disagree, but yours is a point of view I hadn't considered before."

I have worked with parents who reassure me that they honor their child's thoughts. Yet they say to their teenager, "You're too young to understand."

This is not respectful.

In the earliest stages, a child's entire self-image comes from how their parents see them. Children need parents to believe in them and believe in their ability to handle their own problems. Children with dyslexia also need to have real strengths and achievements mirrored back to them. But the compliment must be genuine and specific or the parent will lose credibility.

For example, instead of saying to your child, "You have good manners," you might say, "That was impressive the way you shook hands with Mr. Smith."

Dyslexia batters a child's self-esteem. It takes courage to go back to school after a difficult day of not being successful. Mirror that courage back to your child. I like to tell children that **the coward and the hero are the same inside.** They have the same feelings. **The difference is what they do with those feelings.**

In summary, one important aspect of instilling self-esteem is to make a clear distinction between behavior and feelings. **Behaviors need to be rewarded and punished. Thoughts and feelings need to be honored.**

Self-esteem – that unshakable belief in one's own basic value – will help sustain the child with dyslexia through his/her difficulties, providing a building block for a successful adulthood.

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