

Self-Esteem and Resilience in Children

by Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

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Expert Answers

Self-Esteem and Resilience in Children

What is Self-Esteem?

It's not uncommon for children with learning difficulties to be burdened with feelings of low self-esteem and a lack of confidence. There are various definitions of self-esteem, some of which have been negative, equating self-esteem with kids being self-centered and lacking self-discipline. In this article, Dr. Robert Brooks addresses the questions: How do you define self-esteem, and how important is it?

I believe self-esteem plays a major role in all aspects of a child's life, having an appreciable impact on learning, school performance, and peer relationships. Given the failure situations many children with learning and attention difficulties have experienced, these youngsters are especially vulnerable to low self-esteem. A lack of self-confidence is often associated with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that serve to intensify a child's sense of failure and loss of dignity.

Engaging in the "Blame Game"

When I was a psychology graduate student in the middle to late 1960s, there was limited understanding of youngsters with learning and attention difficulties. These children and adolescents were frequently annointed with such labels as "lazy" and "unmotivated" and exhorted by adults to "try harder." I constantly heard the refrain, "They could do the work if they really wanted to." (Unfortunately, 35 years later we still hear some of these same comments.)

In addition, given the relative isolationism of mental health professionals from the field of education, learning difficulties were typically understood as resulting from emotional problems. Consequently, the primary recommendation was for individual psychotherapy with the belief that once the emotional blocks were removed, the child's learning problems would disappear. When many youngsters did not respond to this treatment approach, when they continued to struggle with learning, it was very easy to refer to them and their parents as "resistant," in essence, blaming them for the apparent treatment failure.

To Be Empathic: Understanding the Importance of Self-Esteem

As I saw more children with learning problems in therapy, I began to wonder: "Are these children truly resistant? Don't they want to improve? Are they unmotivated to change? Or is my understanding of their difficulties somewhat limited and, thus, the interventions I am using not in keeping with what they need?"

I recognized that to answer these questions I had to become more empathic. I had to place myself in the shoes of children with learning problems and see the world through their eyes. In my efforts to grasp this world, I used data from psychological tests, direct interviews, and questionnaires. I asked them to describe what it was like to have a learning disability. I also engaged these children in writing stories about their lives and their learning struggles.

“It became increasingly apparent to me that if I were to improve the lives of children with learning problems, I had to reflect upon how to enhance their self-esteem.”

What is Self-Esteem?

While some youth with learning problems maintained a relatively positive self-image, what impressed me was that the vast majority had suffered assaults to their self-esteem as a consequence of their learning failures. **Many of these children not only demonstrated anxiety and a lack of confidence, but they also harbored doubts about whether their situation would ever improve.** Thus, a loss of hope dominated their lives. These themes of low self-esteem and hopelessness were captured in the following first-hand accounts:

“I was born to quit and God made me that way.”

“It (learning problem) makes me feel terrible. It makes me realize there is a barrier that stops me from having a happy and successful future.”

“Sometimes I feel unrespected, unconfident, lower than other people. I also feel I could never do half the stuff I want to do, and that makes me feel frustrated.”

Caitlin, a seven-year-old I saw in therapy, was beset by reading and attention struggles. She created a story, with my assistance, about a dog named Fidget. It was soon apparent that Fidget was a representation of Caitlin; the dog was described as having difficulty learning to read and concentrating on her work. The themes of low self-worth and a sense of hopelessness were poignantly captured in Caitlin's second paragraph which read, “Fidget told herself that she would get over this problem someday, but she wondered if she really would. She was worried that when she grew up and her own puppies asked her something, she would not know the answer, and they would wonder why their mother was not very smart.”

Caitlin's words reflected not only her low self-esteem but also a fear expressed by many children with cognitive and learning problems, namely, that the situation will not improve. In essence, many of these children have lost one of the most precious gifts we possess — hope. It became increasingly apparent to me that if I were to improve the lives of children with learning problems, I had to reflect upon how to enhance their self-esteem.

Self-Esteem: A Definition

Some clinicians and researchers have defined self-esteem almost exclusively in terms of the difference between what you would like to be and who you feel you really are. I tend to use a broader definition.

I believe self-esteem includes the feelings and thoughts we have about our competencies and worth, our abilities to make a positive difference, our level of optimism, our willingness to confront rather than retreat from realistic challenges, our capacity to learn from both our successes and failures, and our ability to treat ourselves as well as others with respect. Viewed in this light, self-esteem, which is greatly influenced by our experiences of success, guides and motivates what we do, and, in turn, the outcome of what we do further affects our self-esteem. **Thus, a cycle constantly operates in which our successes (or failures) impact our self-esteem, which then influences our beliefs and actions, which then influence our self-esteem.**

While I place great importance on enhancing self-esteem in my work, some psychologists and educators have viewed the concept of self-esteem from a very different perspective, contending that those who advocate fostering self-esteem are doing so at the expense of teaching children responsibility, self-discipline, and caring. I do not subscribe to such a negative view of self-esteem. One basis for these differences may reside in the confusion between what Lerner (1996) calls “feel-good-now” self-esteem versus “earned” self-esteem. She argues:

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“Earned self-esteem is based on success in meeting the tests of reality — measuring up to standards — at home and in school. It is necessarily hard-won and develops slowly, but it is stable and long-lasting, and provides a secure foundation for further growth and development.” (*American Educator*, 20, p. 12)

In contrast, “feel-good-now” self-esteem is perceived as attempting to reinforce feelings of self-worth by providing activities that do not truly challenge children, or set up realistic expectations, or teach them how to deal with mistakes. Lerner believes this kind of self-esteem replaces authenticity and hard work with false praise and lowered standards, prompting us to rescue children before they have had an opportunity to test their capabilities.

As is apparent, my notion of self-esteem resonates with Lerner’s description of “earned self-esteem.” I do not believe children can develop a stable, enduring sense of self-worth and confidence unless they truly succeed in areas they believe are important to significant adults in their lives and to their peer group. Children are quick to perceive when praise is false and expectations are low, providing them little sense of dignity.

“Children with low self-esteem are likely to ascribe failure to an unchangeable, inner lack of ability, reinforcing feelings of hopelessness.”

Attribution Theory: One Framework for Understanding Self-Esteem

In ending this article, I should like to describe one framework for understanding the components of self-esteem I have found helpful in guiding interventions to reinforce the self-worth and hope of children and adolescents with learning difficulties. The framework was initially proposed by Weiner (1974) and applied by many clinicians. It is called “attribution theory.” Basically, this theory examines the explanations children offer for why they believe they succeed or fail at tasks. These explanations are directly linked to a child’s self-esteem.

More specifically, **research indicates children with high self-esteem believe their success is determined in great part by their own efforts and ability. In contrast, children with low self-esteem (many children with learning difficulties fall into this group) are more apt to believe their success is based on luck or chance or factors outside their control.** Such children are quick to dismiss a high test score with the following comments: “The teacher made the test easy,” or “I was lucky.” Not surprisingly, such a self-perception weakens confidence of being successful in the future and is frequently a dominant belief of children with learning and attention struggles.

In terms of failure situations, children who possess high self-esteem typically attribute a lack of success to factors within their control to change, such as lack of effort (especially if the task is realistically achievable) or poor strategies (e.g., ineffective study strategies). These children entertain the belief that mistakes are experiences from which to learn rather than feel defeated by. Children with low self-esteem, however, are likely to ascribe failure to an unchangeable, inner lack of ability, reinforcing feelings of hopelessness.

Attribution theory has major implications for working with children and adolescents with learning problems. It helps to frame the following questions for parents and professionals:

- How do we create an environment in our homes and schools to reinforce the likelihood youngsters with learning difficulties will not only succeed but also experience their accomplishments as based in great part on their own abilities and efforts? Posed somewhat differently, **how do we reinforce a sense of personal control in these youth so they assume an increasing sense of ownership for their own lives?** A feeling of personal control is part of the basic scaffolding for self-esteem and motivation.

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- How do we create an environment in our homes and schools that reinforces children's belief that mistakes and failure are frequently the basis for learning and are not only accepted but expected? How do we instill in children and adolescents with learning problems, many of whom feel defeated after having faced years of frustration and failure, the conviction that their failures need not represent an albatross around their neck and that they can learn and succeed? **How do we lessen or even erase fears of being humiliated and embarrassed for not understanding something the first time?**

I will address these questions in the coming weeks. In my next article, I will discuss a question I am frequently asked: "What are the signs of low self-esteem or what should I look for in my children (or students) that would suggest they are struggling with feelings of low self-worth?" The answer is very important for if we are to help children with low self-esteem, we must have some sense of the various ways in which these feelings are manifested.

Expert Answers

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How Can Parents Spot Low Self-Esteem in Their Children?

Given the many failure situations they've experienced, children and adolescents with learning difficulties often feel low self-esteem and a loss of confidence. In this article, Dr. Robert Brooks addresses the questions: What are the signs of low self-esteem? How hard is it to identify?

Since many youngsters with learning and attention difficulties are burdened by low self-esteem, it is important for parents, teachers, and other adults to be aware of the signs. An increased awareness allows us to have a greater understanding of children with learning differences and to assist them to become more confident and self-assured.

The signs of low self-esteem may vary considerably from one child to the next and even from one situation to the next. Children especially experience low self-esteem in situations in which they believe they are destined for failure. Thus, **it is not unusual for youngsters with learning problems to feel most vulnerable in settings in which their learning difficulties are very obvious and exposed, such as in school.** Not surprisingly, some of these children feel greater confidence when engaged in an activity in which they feel more proficient, for example, an adolescent boy with learning difficulties who feels "stupid" in school but very self-assured while working on the motor of his car. Unfortunately, for a number of youngsters, a sense of low self-esteem is so pervasive that there are few, if any, situations in which they feel competent.

“Youngsters with low self-esteem are likely to rely on coping behaviors that are self-defeating and represent a retreat from problems, only adding to the child's plight.”

How do we know when children suffer from low self-esteem? Sometimes the signs are very direct, while at other times the signs must be inferred from the behavior of the children and the ways in which they cope.

Direct Manifestations of Low Self-Esteem

With some children and adolescents there is little doubt they are weighed down by low self-esteem. Their messages — “I am so stupid,” “I always do everything wrong,” “I will never learn” — capture their despair, sadness, lack of confidence, and loss of hope.

I met Matt when he was a young adolescent. He was diagnosed with learning and attention problems. He lacked confidence and manifested two other signs of low self-esteem, namely, he was depressed and entertained little hope for future success. He wrote a story about school that vividly and directly portrayed the despair and hopelessness of many children with learning problems. As one reads his poignant story, there is little doubt of his struggles with low self-esteem.

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School has been and still is something I dread profusely. Going to school has been like climbing up a tremendous, rocky mountain with steep cliffs and jagged, slippery rocks. This mountain is very grey and always covered in dark, murky, cold clouds. I step forth to take on this task of climbing this huge mountain. Each step is a battle against strong, howling, icy winds. The winds contain frigid rain that slams against my body, trying to push me down. I keep battling my way up. Sometimes I am knocked down, and sometimes I have to stop to regain my strength. My body is numb. My hands shake like leaves in the wind as I claw myself up the mountainside. Not being able to open my eyes, I blindly claw myself up the steep cliff. I stop because I am in so much great pain. I look up and see that my struggle has hardly begun. Sometimes I just do not want to go on any further.

Low Self-Esteem Masked by Coping Strategies

While some children are able to express their low self-esteem and feelings of sadness and depression directly, others are not. Many youngsters with learning problems believe their mistakes and failures are the product of factors that cannot be modified, such as a lack of ability or intelligence. **When children believe that regardless of what they do, they will not succeed, they develop what psychologist Martin Seligman has termed "learned helplessness."** They basically perceive no light at the end of the tunnel; if anything, their vision is filled with images of continued failure.

These youth are in a terrible bind. They do not want to continue to fail and face further embarrassment, but they feel they cannot change the situation. Thus, their only recourse is to search for ways to avoid what they perceive to be further humiliation, and they begin to rely on different ways of coping. In many instances, low self-esteem can be inferred from the particular coping behaviors used by children in their struggles to manage pressure. One of my favorite ways to assess the self-esteem of children is to ask parents or teachers how the child responds to mistakes and failure. Observing the manner in which children deal with mistakes provides a great deal of information about their sense of self-worth and confidence.

It is important to emphasize that all children and adults use particular coping strategies to manage challenges and stresses. **Children with high self-esteem tend to use coping behaviors that are adaptive and lead to mastery and growth.** A child who is having difficulty with math requests extra help, a child who has trouble catching a baseball spends additional time with a coach practicing this skill, or a child experiencing peer problems makes a concerted effort to engage classmates in a more considerate, thoughtful way.

In contrast, youngsters with low self-esteem are likely to rely on coping behaviors that are self-defeating and represent a retreat from problems, only adding to the child's plight. As we examine some of these ineffective coping strategies that reflect a child's low sense of self-worth, it's important to emphasize that all children may at times demonstrate one or more of these behaviors. Parents often ask me when the use of ineffective or self-defeating ways of coping signals serious problems. As a general guideline, the problem is more significant when the coping strategy has been used for some time, keeps the child from facing problems, and interferes with mastering the typical developmental demands of that age.

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Thus, if parents report their child didn't want to try out for Little League but was involved in other activities, or if a child became frustrated and quit doing a task one night but this was not his usual behavior, there is little reason for concern. However, if parents observe their child constantly backs away from challenges or blames others for failure and always appears depressed or angry, there is strong indication the child is struggling with feelings of low self-worth and is seeking to avoid the possibility of further humiliation. **The more a child's coping strategies exacerbate rather than improve the situation, the more they may be seen as self-defeating and indicative of low self-esteem.**

Examples of Commonly Used, Ineffective Coping Strategies

Quitting: In my clinical practice, I have worked with many youngsters with learning problems who become intensely frustrated when they are unable to succeed at a particular task, prompting them to quit. When they quit, they often offer an excuse, such as the game is boring or the work is dumb.

Avoiding: This coping behavior is closely related to quitting. The main difference is that in quitting the child has begun the task but gives up when failure looms large. In contrast, avoidance indicates the child has refused to engage in the task at all. Many children with learning problems demonstrate this behavior; they will not try out for a play or go out for a team or attempt to do an art project, believing in advance that they will embarrass themselves.

Clowning: Some children hide their lack of confidence by acting silly or clowning around. One perceptive mother, describing her son with learning problems, told me, "Whenever he begins to act silly, I know that he is feeling pressure. Acting silly keeps him from worrying about not succeeding, but it really doesn't work very well."

Controlling: Many youngsters with low self-esteem believe they have little control over their lives, prompting a sense of helplessness. In response, some of these children attempt to take command, becoming dictatorial as they tell others what to do. One child had a great deal of difficulty in his peer relations, always insisting his classmates play the games he wanted to play. Obviously, this way of coping backfired since no one wanted to interact with him.

Being Aggressive and Bullying: Many children and adolescents resort to aggressive behavior as a way of fending off their own feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability. They are prone to seek out victims who demonstrate certain weaknesses. They engage in scapegoating so they do not have to face their own issues of low self-esteem.

Denying: It is not unusual for children with low self-esteem to rely on denial as a way of managing the pain that might result if they were to acknowledge their insecurities. They may deny that they are worried about a school assignment, that they care about how things are going in their life, or that they did not do their homework.

Being Impulsive: Although impulsivity is often a feature of a child's temperament, it may also reflect a coping strategy. Many children with learning difficulties want to finish their work as quickly as possible "just to get it over with" — even if the final product is not very good.

The Importance of Replacing Protective Shields with Something of Value

I want to emphasize that even self-defeating coping behaviors were originally "recruited" by children in an attempt to manage stress and humiliation and to maintain a sense of dignity and self-esteem. These coping behaviors represent a protective shield to children, a shield that should not be removed

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lest these children feel increasingly exposed and vulnerable. **The more vulnerable children feel, the greater their desperation in searching for new coping strategies; unfortunately, these new coping maneuvers may prove even more counterproductive than the original ones, so problems become intensified.**

Our goal is to help these youngsters feel secure and confident so they can abandon self-defeating behaviors. Next week, I will address questions many parents of children with learning difficulties have asked, especially those whose children have expressed a loss of hope in future success — “Is there hope? Can our children overcome feelings of sadness and pessimism? Can they become optimistic and resilient? Can they lead more satisfying lives?”

Expert Answers

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How Can Parents Nurture Resilience in Their Children?

Much of Dr. Robert Brooks' work in recent years has focused on the themes of hope and resilience. In this article, he discusses his interest in these concepts; why some children with learning problems are much more successful as adults than others; and what contributes to their success.

My focus on the themes of hope and resilience arose from my interest in the area of self-esteem in children, as well as from the questions parents asked me. When I began to address the concept of self-esteem, many parents, especially those with children with learning problems, voiced concerns and anxiety about what the future held for their children. Some described portraits of their children that were very disheartening — low self-esteem, poor peer relationships, and failure in school. They posed such questions as, “Is there hope?” “Can my child become more confident and successful?” “Can my child develop more satisfying relationships?”

When I was training as a psychologist, I was taught that our basic personality is formed by the time we are five or six years of age. We now know a great deal of development and change take place after that age. **We also know children who are burdened by learning problems and low self-esteem are not destined to lead a life of unhappiness and lack of success.** In fact, many experience satisfying lives. They are resilient.

Two questions I have often been asked are: “What are the beliefs and skills resilient children possess as compared with those who do not bounce back from adversity?” and “What contributes to some children being more resilient than others?” The answers to both questions hold the key to how we can nurture self-esteem and resilience in children.

The Mindset of the Resilient Child

As my colleague, Dr. Sam Goldstein, and I describe in our book *Raising Resilient Children*, resilient youngsters possess a set of assumptions about themselves and others that distinguishes them from their peers who are not resilient. We have called this set of assumptions a “mindset.” **The mindset of children plays a major role in influencing their behavior, which in turn impacts on their mindset.** Thus, there is an ongoing cycle that may produce a mindset that is more optimistic and hopeful or a mindset that is pessimistic and despairing. When we feel more hopeful, when our self-esteem is higher, we use coping strategies that lead to further growth. However, a feeling of inadequacy and pessimism often triggers coping strategies that are counterproductive or self-defeating (e.g., quitting, clowning, bullying, avoiding).

It is important to understand the mindset resilient youngsters possess so that parents, teachers, and other caregivers can attempt to nurture this mindset during all of their interactions with children with learning problems. The following are several of the key, interrelated components of a resilient mindset:

- **Defining what one has control over and focusing one's time and energy on these areas.** Paul Gerber, who researched adults with learning difficulties who are successful, found that a sense

“We must never underestimate the influence of one caregiver to help children with learning and attention problems to become increasingly hopeful and successful.”

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of control was the major factor in their success. He notes, "Control means making conscious and well-grounded decisions to take charge of one's life." This statement is in accord with the tenets of attribution theory I described in my first article; namely, we must reinforce a sense of ownership and responsibility in our youth. A sense of control overshadows feeling sorry for oneself or seeing oneself as a victim.

- **Believing one can solve problems and make decisions.** This is closely tied to feelings of being in control. It is difficult to imagine children knowing and focusing on what they have control over without possessing solid problem-solving skills.
- **Possessing self-discipline.** Resilient children learn to think before they act. They are guided by a more reflective style instead of being dominated by impulsive behavior.
- **Feeling mistakes and failure are experiences from which to learn.** Resilient individuals believe they can learn from mistakes. Mistakes can serve as the springboard for developing a more realistic picture of oneself and more effective learning strategies. This is also one of the basic features of attribution theory.
- **Believing one can contribute to and make a positive difference in the world.** In my research, I asked adults to look back at their childhood in school and describe one of their most positive moments involving something a teacher said or did to boost their self-esteem. The most frequent response was they were asked to help out or contribute in some manner, such as "I was asked to pass out the milk and straws," "I tutored a younger child," "I helped take care of the plants in the lobby." To be asked to help others communicates the message, "We believe you have something to offer and are a valuable member of the community."
- **Defining one's "islands of competence" but not denying one's areas of weakness.** Every child has islands of competence, or areas of strength. Too often, with children with learning problems, we tend to focus on their deficits and how to "fix" them, rather than on how to build on their strengths. Resilient youngsters are able to articulate and use their strengths. Stated somewhat differently, they do not perceive their entire personality as associated with their learning problems.
- **Feeling comfortable with and believing others can be a source of support and strength.** Resilient youngsters are able to seek out assistance in a comfortable way. This component of a resilient mindset, closely related to all of the other components, captures the significance of positive relationships in the process of fostering resilience.

Domains that Contribute to Resilience

Researchers have noted three major domains that influence the development of resilience. They are:

- **Internal Resources.** Resilient children have often been found to possess a so-called "easy" temperament, eliciting positive responses from adults. This facilitates the emergence of more advanced problem-solving skills and coping strategies, a higher level of self-esteem, and a realistic sense of personal control.
- **Family Climate.** Not unexpectedly, resilient children are more likely to come from home environments characterized by warmth, affection, emotional support, and clear-cut and reasonable structure and limits.

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- **Social Environment outside the Home.** Extended family members, friends, and community groups can also provide needed support. Schools have been highlighted as institutions that are very important in fostering a child's sense of hope and a resilient mindset. Given the failure situations many children with learning problems experience in school, it is especially important for educators to implement strategies that foster realistic achievement and minimize possible humiliation.

The Importance of a “Charismatic Adult”

A common theme in these three domains is the presence of a supportive adult. We must never underestimate the influence of one caregiver to help children with learning and attention problems to become increasingly hopeful and successful. Emmy Werner, an eminent researcher in the field of resilience, noted, “Most of all, self-esteem and self-efficacy were promoted through supportive relationships. The resilient youngsters in our study all had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally.”

The late Julius Segal called that one person, a “charismatic adult.” In a review of numerous studies, he observed that **one factor helping at-risk children beat the heavy odds against them was “the presence in their lives of a charismatic adult — a person with whom they identify and from whom they gather strength.”** Segal went on to say, “And in a surprising number of cases that person turns out to be a teacher.”

Supporting Segal's observations was a statement in a Massachusetts Department of Education report that emphasized, “Possibly the most critical element to success within school is a student developing a close and nurturing relationship with at least one caring adult. Students need to feel that there is someone within school whom they know, to whom they can turn, and who will act as an advocate for them.”

I believe parents, teachers, coaches, and other caregivers have the capacity to become the charismatic adult in the lives of youngsters with learning difficulties. If one is to serve in this role, an important question that emerges is how best to do so and what interventions are most effective. Frameworks for self-esteem, such as attribution theory, as well as an understanding of the components of a resilient mindset can serve as guideposts to answer this question.

Next week, I will address how adults must change their own “negative scripts” and “negative mindsets” if children with learning problems are to change theirs. My final two articles will focus on what parents and teachers can do to foster self-esteem, motivation, hope, and resilience in these youngsters.

Expert Answers

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Can Changing my Behavior toward my Child Improve our Relationship?

Dr. Robert Brooks often emphasizes that if children are to change their behavior and ineffective ways of coping, the adults in their lives often must first change their own behavior. In this article, Dr. Brooks addresses these key questions: Why is it so important for adults to change? Also, if children are misbehaving or not meeting their responsibilities, shouldn't they be the ones to change?

Many children with learning problems are burdened with feelings of low self-esteem and resort to the use of ineffective coping strategies to mask their sense of inadequacy. Unfortunately, these youngsters become fixed in the way they respond to a variety of situations, repeating the same self-defeating behaviors over and over again. It is as if they are following a prescribed script with little, if any, room for improvisation.

Adding to the problem is a phenomenon that parents and teachers, attempting to change the “negative script” of the child, often unintentionally develop their own “negative scripts.” It is as if we are watching a play, where the words and behavior of all the “cast members” are set in stone. One can predict that if the child says or does something, the parent will respond in an equally predictable way. In effect, there is no room for change; rather the scripts become increasingly familiar and entrenched. This would not be a problem if the scripts had a more positive tone, but often the scripts perpetuate a negative situation.

It Takes Two to Tango

When such a situation exists, what can we, as parents, teachers, and other professionals who work with children with learning and attention problems, do to make positive changes? I have discovered that if strategies for fostering self-esteem, motivation, hope, and resilience in children are to be effective, adults typically must make the first changes in order to create the appropriate climate for youngsters to abandon their negative behaviors.

Unfortunately, many well-meaning adults expect children to take the initial step and alter their behavior. One father said to me, “If I change my expectations, my son will think I’m giving in and take advantage of the situation.” I believe that if adults have the courage to modify the ways in which they have been relating to children, these children will become more cooperative, rather than more manipulative and resistant. For this reason, I use the metaphor “It takes two to tango.” By this I mean, whether or not youngsters with learning and attention problems modify their behavior may have as much to do with our reactions as with the child’s mindset.

As an example, I consulted with teachers about a high school freshman with learning problems who was hyperactive and required time at the beginning of each day to acclimate himself to school. The teachers referred to him as a “roamer” since he never seemed to get to his homeroom on time, preferring instead to roam the halls. They reported that rewards and punishments seemed to have little, if any, impact on his behavior. They also interpreted his behavior as “willful” and “manipulative.”

“Parents and teachers ... often unintentionally develop their own ‘negative scripts.’ ”

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I empathized with the teachers, but given their continued lack of success in changing his behavior I wondered what they might do differently. I also questioned whether he was being willful, as they assumed, or if in fact, given his hyperactivity, he had a “need” to roam. I asked how we might use his need to roam constructively.

Although at first the teachers felt it was this student’s responsibility to change, I was impressed by their willingness to modify their script. This led to some creative problem solving in which the student was appointed “attendance monitor,” a position that entailed his walking down the hall with a clipboard each morning, a clipboard containing the name of each teacher. The principal informed this boy that it would help the school if he would take attendance of teachers to ensure there was a teacher present in each classroom. This responsibility provided an avenue through which this adolescent could comfortably transition to the school environment each day, enabling him to adjust to the demands of the school. In essence, these adults were willing to change their script first, having the courage to ask what they could do differently. None felt they were “giving in” by taking the first step, a feeling reinforced by this boy’s demonstrating greater success and responsibility in school.

“Adults typically must make the first changes in order to create the appropriate climate for youngsters to abandon their negative behaviors.”

Giving in or Creating Cooperation?

I especially want to address the issue of “giving in.” If an intervention to motivate students with learning problems is not working, then it is our responsibility to develop and implement more effective strategies. Last year when I was giving a workshop in Texas, one of the participants laughingly said, “We have an expression for that in Texas. If the horse is dead, get off.” While many may agree with this expression, I continue to attend meetings in schools or clinics in which I hear, “We have been doing this for six months and the child is still not responding. He (or she) is resistant and oppositional.”

I believe in perseverance, but if we have used an intervention for six months with no positive results, I often wonder, “Who are the resistant ones in this scenario?” When asked if youngsters will fail to learn responsibility if adults make the first changes, I answer, “That will only occur if the goals of our changes are not to promote ownership and cooperation in youth.”

Returning to the theme of empathy, I believe empathic adults should always ask two questions when raising or working with children with learning and attention difficulties. They are:

- “In anything I say or do what do I hope to accomplish? What is my goal?”
- “Am I saying or doing it in a way that the child or adolescent will be most likely to listen and respond positively to me?”

As an illustration, many parents and teachers may exhort children with learning problems to “try harder.” Their goal is to motivate these children. However, the comment “try harder” is typically experienced as judgmental and accusatory, often prompting greater anger and less cooperation on the part of the students.

As an alternative, I recommend adults change their script and not utter a comment one can predict in advance which has a high likelihood of being perceived as accusatory. Instead, I suggest adults say to children with learning difficulties that the problem is not they are not trying, but rather the strategies they are using to learn, or the strategies the teachers are using to instruct them, are not proving effective. Although it may seem like a small difference, casting a problem in terms of an ineffective strategy removes the judgmental quality of saying, “Try harder.”

Can Changing my Behavior toward my Child Improve our Relationship?

Teachers have told me this modification has led to a more cooperative relationship with students in seeking more productive strategies. Collaborating with students in this way also increases a feeling of ownership which, as attribution theory has shown, is one of the hallmarks of increased self-esteem and confidence, as well as one of the main characteristics of a resilient mindset.

Steps to Change Negative Scripts

Strategies to foster self-esteem, motivation, and resilience in children with learning problems will have a greater probability of success if we change any of our own ineffective scripts. Following are some steps to modify negative scripts that Dr. Sam Goldstein and I describe in our book *Raising Resilient Children*. I hope they will serve as guidelines as you attempt to modify those scripts that have proved unsuccessful in your relationship with your child, student, or client.

- **Accept your responsibility to change.**

Remember that constructive changes you make will encourage children to make positive changes as well. I am reminded of a school social worker who enlisted five students with behavior and attendance problems to join her on a committee that examined why children do not want to go to school. They developed a questionnaire to answer this question, and their presence on this committee served to decrease their behavior and increase their attendance. This was a far better script than constantly punishing these students.

- **Reflect upon what you have done in the past and why it hasn't worked.**

Obviously, this is a very important step but one must be careful not to immediately place the blame for the lack of success on the children by saying they are resistant and unmotivated. Instead, parents and teachers must assume an empathic stance by seeing the world through the eyes of the children. In the example noted above involving "Try harder," a parent might wonder, "If I were having difficulty with a task at work, how would I like it if my boss said, 'You could do it if you wanted to, just try harder!'"

- **A positive solution begins with a new, possible solution.**

Once you accept responsibility to make changes and gain an understanding of why previous solutions have been ineffective, you can consider adopting new solutions and scripts. One teacher recognized she was being very critical and punitive with a fifth grade girl with learning problems who often used quitting as a way of coping with the demands of school. We discussed how opportunities had not been created for this girl to display her "islands of competence," which were her artwork and her ability to relate positively with younger children. When her teacher arranged for some of her drawings to be hung in the school lobby and for the girl to read to a couple of kindergarten children on a weekly basis, her work improved and she was able to give up her reliance on quitting.

- **If a solution is ineffective, there is probably another solution in the background.**

I know parents and teachers who have changed their scripts, but unfortunately their efforts did not result in a change of scripts in the children in their lives. When this occurs, adults often feel children are taking advantage of them and are not willing to accept responsibility for their own behavior. However, I have learned that while a proposed strategy may seem flawless in my

“Just as we want our children not to be discouraged by their mistakes but to think of alternative solutions, so too we must believe we can learn from our failures.”

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office, it may not be effective in the “real” world. It is for this reason that whenever I develop an intervention with a parent or teacher, I always raise the question, “What if it doesn’t work?” I am not doing this to engage in a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure. Rather, I am asking about back-up plans. Just as we want our children not to be discouraged by their mistakes but to think of alternative solutions, so too we must believe we can learn from our failures.

If we subscribe to the belief that our mindset and subsequent actions can lead to positive changes in our children, then we will be better equipped to implement strategies in our classrooms and homes to foster self-esteem, hope, and resilience in children with learning problems. My next article will focus on such strategies in the home environment, while my final article will describe strategies that can be used in our schools.

Expert Answers

Self-Esteem and Resilience in Children

How Can Parents Foster Self-Esteem in their Children?

Dr. Robert Brooks urges parents of children with learning problems give up their negative scripts. In this article, Dr. Brooks tells parents what they can do to be more effective in nurturing self-esteem, competence, and resilience.

I would like to summarize the main points made in my other articles.

- Children with learning and attention difficulties often struggle with feelings of low self-esteem and a loss of hope for future success.
- They rely on counterproductive, or self-defeating, coping behaviors to deal with these feelings of failure, hopelessness, and humiliation.
- It is the responsibility of the adults in the lives of children to alter their own ineffective behaviors if these children are to change their behaviors.
- Every youngster has “islands of competence”, or areas of strength, upon which we can build.
- Adults must identify and reinforce these islands so a sense of hope and optimism may replace feelings of despair.

“A basic feature of high self-esteem and resilience is the belief that one has control over many areas of one’s life and can accurately define these areas.”

Interventions to Nurture Self-Esteem and Resilience in the Home

Attribution theory offers guideposts for bolstering self-esteem and hope. It directs us to seek ways for youngsters with learning problems to feel an increasing sense of ownership, control, and responsibility for their successes and to view mistakes as experiences from which to learn rather than feel defeated. What follows are several key strategies with examples of how parents might accomplish this task. Each family should use these strategies in a way that is in accord with the family’s values and best meets the particular needs of each child.

1. Understanding and Accepting Our Children’s Learning Problems and De-Mystifying These Problems for Them

A first step in helping children with learning difficulties is for parents to appreciate the nature of these problems, to truly learn to accept children for who they are and not what we had hoped they would be, and to help children understand their unique learning strengths and weaknesses. Many parents have told me that before they became parents the notion of “accepting children for who they are” seemed an easy task, but they discovered it was far more difficult to achieve once their children arrived. Whether we realize it or not, parents have images of who their children will be even before these children are born; children rarely live up to these images, so disappointment is likely to emerge.

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A failure to understand the nature of our children's learning styles and learning struggles may lead well-meaning parents to have unrealistic expectations and to say and do things that actually contribute to a lowering of self-esteem and motivation. I once worked with parents who described their 9-year-old son as "irresponsible, unmotivated, and manipulative." They were frustrated by his failure to do his homework and follow through on chores in the house. They fell into a negative script of resorting to punishment, believing "he could do it if he wanted to." Their frustration was evident in their first meeting with me when they said, "We have encouraged him to try harder, we have taken away many privileges like watching TV and playing video games, we stand over him to do his work, but the problem seems to be getting worse, and our relationship with him is terrible."

As I reviewed his developmental and school history, I strongly recommended an assessment of his learning strengths and weaknesses. Interestingly, the results clearly indicated learning problems that had not been identified previously, especially in his language and organizational skills. With this knowledge, the mindset of the parents changed as they worked closely with the school to develop more realistic expectations for their son and to implement support services.

As a result of changes in the mindset of the parents and teachers, which were reflected in a more compassionate, encouraging approach, this boy's negative attitude lessened noticeably and he became an integral member of the "treatment team." **Facilitating this boy's change was the neuropsychologist who did the evaluation as he skillfully reviewed the test findings with the child. Strengths, or islands of competence, were highlighted.** Not only were problem areas described in language the boy could comprehend but, very importantly, so too were steps that could be taken to address these learning difficulties. After receiving this feedback, the boy shared with me that in the past he thought he was "very dumb and stupid and would never learn." The de-mystification of his problem and the articulation of treatment strategies helped him develop a more realistic sense of ownership, responsibility, and optimism for what occurred in his life.

2. Teaching Children How to Solve Problems and Make Decisions

A basic feature of high self-esteem and resilience is the belief that one has control over many areas of one's life and can accurately define these areas. This belief is tied to a feeling of ownership, which is a vital foundation for motivation. If we wish our children to develop this sense of control, it is imperative we provide them with opportunities from an early age to learn and apply problem-solving and decision-making skills. It is difficult to conceive of a child who lacks these skills to feel in control. Psychologist Myrna Shure, who developed the "I Can Problem Solve Program," advocates that parents avoid rushing in to solve a child's problems but rather engage the child in the process of thinking about two or three possible solutions, consider what solution might work best, and then attempt that solution.

I have used Dr. Shure's basic approach in my own work. However, I have also emphasized that, as an initial step, **we must gain an agreement with our children that**

- **what we perceive as a problem is something they also perceive as a problem** (I have learned that there is not always agreement between parents and children about what is or is not a problem.) and
- **we consider a couple of back-up solutions should the first one prove ineffective** (I believe that to lessen feelings of failure, we must anticipate the possibility of a strategy not working.)

I have been impressed that children as young as four years of age can offer relatively sophisticated solutions to problems when given the opportunity. For instance, I once worked with a 7-year-old girl with learning problems who agreed that getting ready for school in the morning, meeting

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responsibilities at home (e.g., putting toys away), and completing her homework were difficult for her. If her parents reminded her to complete these tasks, she became angry and accused them of nagging her. I asked her what she would suggest and was pleasantly surprised to hear her proposed solutions: getting a clock radio with two alarms so that if the first did not get her up, the second would, making a list of her responsibilities that was posted on the refrigerator and in her room, and being allowed to “rest” for an hour after school rather than beginning her homework immediately (the homework still had to be completed before dinner). We discussed these proposed ideas with her parents and built in safety nets and consequences: if she forgot to do something, her parents could simply say, “Check the list” and if she did not complete her homework before dinner, the following day she would be required to begin her homework earlier. A key component in this process was her involvement in considering different solutions.

3. Reinforcing Responsibility by Having Children Contribute

Self-esteem and resilience are nurtured when children are asked to contribute to their world and to the well-being of others. In my research and clinical work, I have found that one of the most effective ways of boosting self-worth and motivation is to communicate to our children, “You have something of value to offer; your presence makes a positive difference in the lives of others.”

- **The basic message from parents to their children should be “We need your help.”** The specific activities can include having certain household responsibilities or involving our children in helping us at a soup kitchen or delivering food for the elderly or going for a walk for one’s favorite charity. These “contributory activities” serve to strengthen a child’s self-worth and dignity and provide the encouragement and motivation to attempt tasks that have proved problematic in the past. We must remember that success begets future success.
- **Our children’s islands of competence can guide us in the tasks we offer them to help others.** One teenage girl with learning problems loved interacting with younger children. Her parents affectionately referred to her as the “Pied Piper of the block.” Her sense of responsibility increased greatly when she was asked to watch two neighborhood siblings one afternoon a week. A 10-year-old boy with school difficulties volunteered one afternoon a week at a local nursing home, playing chess or checkers with the residents. This activity nurtured his confidence.

4. Learning from Rather than Feeling Defeated by Mistakes

All children are concerned about making mistakes and looking foolish. However, youngsters with learning problems typically experience more failure situations than their peers who do not have these problems and, thus, are even more vulnerable and fearful about failing. Attribution theory indicates children with high self-esteem view mistakes as experiences from which to learn, while their counterparts with low self-esteem perceive mistakes as things they cannot change, often prompting them to avoid or retreat from tasks. If we are to raise resilient children, it is essential to help them develop a more positive attitude towards mistakes.

How best to do this? In part, we can be guided by two questions that I often ask in my parenting workshops and in my clinical work. They are:

- “What do your children observe when you make a mistake?”
- “What do you do when your children make mistakes?”

“If we are to raise resilient children, it is essential to help them develop a more positive attitude towards mistakes.”

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In terms of the first question, we serve as models for our children. It is for this reason I often ask children to describe how their parents act when they (the parents) make mistakes. Children who grow up in homes in which parents model effective ways of coping with mistakes will respond, "They joke about it," "They say it's not a big deal," "They wonder what they can do differently next time." Unfortunately, I have also heard the following, "They scream," "They curse," "They quit." One of the most memorable responses came from a boy who asked me, "What's a double martini?" Obviously, his parents were not modeling an effective way of dealing with frustration.

Shifting to the second question, parents must examine how they respond to their children's mistakes. Out of frustration, some parents have said to their kids with learning problems, "I told you it wouldn't work!" or "You don't try hard enough!" or "Why don't you use your brains!" **When children make mistakes, they need our support, and we should use a problem-solving approach.** They should hear us say, "That's okay. Let's figure out how we can succeed next time." We should also prepare our children for the possibility of mistakes by saying in advance, "If this doesn't work, there are other things we can attempt."

Remember, one of the most important things we can do to promote high self-esteem and resilience in our children is to help them deal comfortably with obstacles, mistakes, and setbacks.

5. Special Needs or Feeling Special

Self-esteem and hope are nurtured when we convey appreciation and unconditional love to our children. Although political and funding issues prohibit us from abandoning the term "special needs," I have frequently entertained the idea of replacing the words with a sign in front of every home and school that reads, "Every child who enters these doors needs to feel special." **To use Julius Segal's description, we must strive to be the "charismatic adult" in our children's lives, an adult from whom they "gather strength."**

Children will feel loved when we create special times alone with them each day or week. I recommend that parents of young children say to them, "When I read or play with you, it's such a special time that even if the phone rings, I won't answer it." **Designating these special times is especially important for youngsters with learning and attention problems who often feel they have let themselves and others down.** One boy with learning difficulties told me what a "disappointment" he was to his parents. Thus, with these youngsters, we must be even more sensitive to their need to feel our unconditional love.

I often think about a 5-year-old boy with attention problems who believed correctly that his father was disappointed and angry with him. I empathized with this father's frustration, and we discussed ways in which to help his son begin to feel special in his father's eyes. This father scheduled a "private time" once a week, which involved going to a local donut shop for breakfast before school. The boy proudly told me about this "private time" with his dad, a time that served as a catalyst for improving their relationship and helping the child feel loved and accepted — cornerstones of self-esteem.

In my next article, I will describe interventions schools can adopt to complement the actions of parents in fostering self-esteem, hope, and resilience in students with learning problems.

Expert Answers

Self-Esteem and Resilience in Children

How Can Teachers Foster Self-Esteem in Children?

In this article, Dr. Robert Brooks describes what teachers can do to foster motivation, self-esteem, and resilience in students with learning problems.

The answer parallels many of the same strategies I described for parents to bolster a child's sense of self-esteem, optimism, and resilience. Research about resilience highlights the significant influence of even one adult to help children with learning and attention problems become increasingly hopeful and successful. The late Julius Segal called that one person a "charismatic adult," noting this was an adult with whom children "identify and from whom they gather strength." Segal observed, "And in a surprising number of cases that person turns out to be a teacher." Not surprisingly, teachers and schools play a major role in determining a child's sense of self-worth and dignity.

“Self-esteem and resilience are nurtured when children are provided opportunities to contribute to their world and to the well-being of others.”

The Mindset of Teachers Who Are Charismatic Adults

How can teachers serve as charismatic adults? Certainly they must use particular interventions to bolster the self-esteem and resilience of students. However, if strategies are to be effective, the teachers using them must possess a positive mindset, or set of assumptions, about themselves and their students. Some of the main features of this mindset are:

1. **Every student desires to learn and be successful in school.** If they are not, we must strive to understand the nature of their learning problems.
2. **If students are demonstrating self-defeating behaviors, such as quitting, or not trying, or acting like the class clown or class bully, we must recognize these are ineffective coping strategies that often mask feelings of vulnerability,** low self-esteem, and hopelessness. Rather than impose punitive consequences, we must ask how to minimize the despair these youngsters experience each and every day.
3. **If we are to lessen the use of these ineffective coping behaviors, we must teach these youngsters in ways they can learn best.** This implies that as educators we must first change our approach and teaching style if students with learning problems are to adopt a more hopeful, positive approach. We must be comfortable in making accommodations when needed.
4. **Each child or adolescent possesses "islands of competence," or areas of strength, that must be identified, reinforced, and displayed by educators.** A strength-based model does not deny the child's problems but recognizes the importance of using the child's strengths as an important component of any intervention program.
5. **We must actively invite and involve students in the process of their own education.**

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Interventions to Nurture Self-Esteem and Resilience in the School Environment

If one accepts the tenets of this mindset, then it is easier for educators to rely upon attribution theory for offering guideposts for bolstering self-esteem and hope. This theory directs us to find ways for youngsters with learning problems to feel an increasing sense of ownership, control, and responsibility for their successes and to view mistakes as experiences from which to learn rather than feel defeated. What follows are several key strategies with examples of how teachers might accomplish this task. Each educator should use these strategies in a way that most successfully meets the particular needs of each student.

1. Understanding Our Students' Learning Problems and De-Mystifying These Problems for Them

A first step in helping children with learning difficulties is for teachers and parents to appreciate the nature of these problems, help children understand their unique learning strengths and weaknesses, and make appropriate accommodations in their school programs. When I conduct psychological/educational evaluations, I seek to enlist the children, as well as their parents and teachers, as active “partners” in the evaluation. **I ask these youngsters what they see as their learning strengths and weaknesses. I am often very impressed with their ability to articulate their learning profile.** I describe the evaluation as an attempt to understand more clearly their strengths and weaknesses so together we can figure out the best ways for them to learn.

When I complete an evaluation, I sit down with the youngster to review my findings, emphasizing both his islands of competence and his areas of difficulty and what we might do to strengthen the latter. Typically, I write a special report for each child, thanking him for working with me and detailing, in language he can understand, the main findings of the evaluation and the interventions I believe would help him. I should note that the interventions follow from the discussions I have with parents and teachers.

My close friend Dr. Mel Levine, through his writings and lectures, has skillfully demonstrated the importance of de-mystifying for children their learning strengths and problems. The more articulate students are about their learning style, the better equipped they will be to become self-advocates for what they need to succeed in the school environment.

2. Making Appropriate Accommodations to Maximize the Success of Children with Learning Problems in School

If all children learn differently, then it makes inherent sense that we teach them in ways they learn best. The kinds of accommodations I typically recommend do not require major modifications in a student's program, nor do they demand that a teacher have different educational plans for each student in the classroom. What is required is that all parties — students, teachers, parents — understand a child's strengths and weaknesses, arrive at common expectations and goals, and recognize what has to be done to reach these goals.

Some teachers have raised the question whether it is “fair” to make accommodations for one student, especially if other students feel offended. While I understand this concern, I believe that since all children are different and learn differently, the least fair thing is to treat all of them the same. However, the issue of fairness must be openly addressed lest other students begin to resent those students who are receiving accommodations. For this reason, I advocate that schools use the first couple of days of the new school year (although it is never too late) as an “orientation” period. During this period, teachers would not focus on academic content but instead would use the time to create a classroom climate in which all students would have the opportunity to thrive.

How Can Teachers Foster Self-Esteem in Children?

For example, to lessen the possibility of children feeling a teacher is unfair because some children might be doing more work than others, on the first day of school, the teacher can discuss with the class how each student is different, how some students read more quickly than others, how some can solve math problems more proficiently, how some can run faster than others. The teacher can then say that given these differences, there will be different goals and expectations of the amount and kind of work done by each student. The teacher can add, "One of my concerns is that you may begin to feel I am not being fair, and if you do, those feelings may interfere with learning. Thus, if at any time you feel I am not being fair, please tell me so we can discuss it."

The feedback I have received indicates that when a teacher introduces the topic of "fairness" before it becomes an issue, it remains a non-issue and permits the teacher to accommodate to each student's needs without negative feelings emerging. Obviously, teachers should share this message of fairness with parents, perhaps through a short statement of class philosophy that is sent home.

As noted, the kinds of modifications I typically have recommended do not require major changes. A teacher reviewing several of these recommendations recently remarked, "These are all very reasonable." The following are a small selection of these accommodations:

- **Untimed tests should be provided.** I have known students with learning problems whose scores have gone up significantly by taking tests untimed, and yet they only required a few extra minutes. Removing the pressure of time lessened their anxiety.
- **A maximum time for homework can be defined.** I believe that if most members of a class can do six math problems in 15 minutes, then, if possible, teachers should set that as a maximum time. If some students can do only three problems in that time span, the three should be accepted. To ask students with learning and attention problems to put in an inordinate amount of time for homework not only is counterproductive in terms of learning, but also increases tension at home.
- **We should ensure students know what the homework assignments are.** Many students with learning problems have difficulty copying homework assignments from the blackboard. Providing the child with a monthly "syllabus" of assignments can be very helpful. Some teachers assign a "buddy" to ensure the child has an accurate picture of the homework required.
- **Children should be permitted to use computers for their assignments.** Many students who have difficulty transmitting their ideas on paper do much better with computers. Yet, I know of teachers who still feel "students have to learn to write." By this they mean, writing with a pen or pencil. My feeling is if students struggle to write with a pen or pencil but find it easier to express their thoughts using a computer, they should be allowed to do so.

3. Teaching Children How to Solve Problems and Make Decisions

I continually emphasize that a basic feature of high self-esteem and resilience is the belief one has control over many areas of one's life and can accurately define these areas. This belief is tied to a feeling of ownership, a vital foundation for motivation. If we wish our children to develop this sense of control, it is essential we provide them with opportunities from an early age to learn and apply problem-solving and decision-making skills.

When I consult with schools and have the opportunity to interview students, I often ask, "What choices or decisions have you made in the past month in school?" Choices and decisions must be

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present if we are to help students with learning problems gain a feeling of ownership and become self-advocates.

Teachers can provide choices in many ways. A couple of examples include:

- Teachers in one school gave a certain number of problems for homework but said to the students, "It's your choice. Look at all six problems, and then do the four you think will help you learn best." By offering the students the choice to "do less," they actually received more homework than in the past, especially since the students felt a greater sense of ownership.
- When children are having difficulty learning, it is advantageous to discuss with them what they think might be most helpful and to attempt certain strategies. As Dr. Myrna Shure has found using her "I Can Problem-Solve" program, even young children are capable of coming up with different options to help them learn more effectively.

“A wonderful legacy we can leave these children and students is to be the charismatic adults in their lives, knowing they have truly “gathered strength” from us. ”

4. Reinforcing Responsibility by Having Children Contribute

Self-esteem and resilience are nurtured when children are provided opportunities to contribute to their world and to the well-being of others. In my research, I found that when adults are asked, "What is one of your most positive memories of school when you were a student, a memory involving something an adult said or did that boosted your self-esteem and motivation?" the most frequent answer centered around being asked to help.

For this reason when I consult with educators, I request they make a list of their students and what each contributes to the school environment. I have found that when students feel they are making a positive difference in school, they are more motivated to do well and are more willing to take appropriate risks in learning. These acts of caring can easily be linked with academic tasks. There should not be one student in a school who does not feel he is contributing to a better school environment. A few examples follow:

- Students with learning problems can be asked to read to younger children.
- An educator I knew enlisted adolescents with learning problems to sponsor a bake sale and raffle, with the proceeds going to a needy family in the community. This educator noted the students' self-esteem improved as they performed the many academic skills involved in the charitable project.
- Students can take care of plants in school, or paint murals on the wall, or hang up favorite drawings.
- Some schools use cooperative learning groups so students gain experience working together and helping each other. For some youngsters with learning problems, it is the first time they realize they have something to contribute to the school.

How Can Teachers Foster Self-Esteem in Children?

5. Learning from, Rather than Feeling Defeated by, Mistakes

All students are concerned about making mistakes and looking foolish. However, youngsters with learning problems typically experience more failure situations than peers who do not have these problems. Thus, they are even more vulnerable and fearful about failing. They feel especially “exposed” in school since it is an environment in which their learning problems are very evident. If we are to keep students from losing hope and quitting, we must help them develop a more positive attitude towards mistakes.

One of the most effective means of dealing with the fear of making mistakes and failing is to discuss this fear directly with students even before any mistakes are made. This is best done during the “orientation” period mentioned earlier. One of my favorite techniques for accomplishing this task is for teachers to ask at the beginning of the school year, “Who feels they are going to make a mistake and not understand something in class this year?” Before any of the students can respond, teachers can raise their own hands and discuss times when they were students and worried about making mistakes and how this interfered with their learning. **They can then engage the class in a problem-solving discussion of what they can do as teachers and what the class can do to minimize the fear of failing and looking foolish.** Rules can be established about how to call on students and how the teacher and other students should respond when a student does not know an answer.

Openly acknowledging the fear of failure renders it less potent and less destructive. Tying this to a discussion of how we all learn differently and have different strengths (islands of competence) and weaknesses sets the foundation for a class environment filled with respect and understanding. Such an environment is one in which students with learning problems will feel respected and their self-esteem, motivation, hope, and resilience will be nurtured.

Concluding Remarks

One of the most precious gifts we can provide children and adolescents with learning problems is to develop their self-dignity and resilience. I hope this series of articles has provided a helpful portrait of the world of these youngsters and what we can do to assist them to lead more satisfying, fulfilling, successful lives. A wonderful legacy we can leave these children and students is to be the charismatic adults in their lives, knowing they have truly “gathered strength” from us.

Expert Answers



Self-Esteem and Resilience in Children

Resources

Understanding the Concept

Books

Chapter: "The Building Blocks of Self-Esteem" by Robert B. Brooks, Ph.D.

In Book: *Overcoming Underachieving*

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0471170321/>

by Sam Goldstein, Ph.D. and Nancy Mather (Eds.)

Learning Disabilities and Self-Esteem. Look What You've Done!

(Videotape and educational guide)

http://www.ldonline.org/ld_store/brooks_selfesteem.html

by Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

Self-Esteem Revolutions in Children: Understanding & Managing the Critical Transitions in Your Child's Life

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1889140015/>

by Thomas W. Phelan, Ph.D.

The Self-Esteem Teacher

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0886714184/>

by Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

On the Web

Showing Acceptance: Strategies for Parents

<http://www.schwablearning.org/Articles.asp?r=289>

Dr. Robert Brooks' website

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com/>

Recognizing Low Self-Esteem

Books

The Self-Esteem Teacher

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0886714184/>

by Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

The Optimistic Child

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0060977094/>

by Martin Seligman, Ph.D.

Reference

Article: "Self-Esteem during the School Years: Its Normal Development and Hazardous Decline"

by Robert Brooks, Ph.D. (1992), In: *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 39, 537-550

Resources

Nurturing Resilience

Books

Exceeding Expectations: Highly Successful Adults with LD
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0890797056/>
by H. Reiff, P. Gerber, & R. Ginsberg

On Playing a Poor Hand Well: Insights from the Lives of Those Who Have Overcome
Childhood Risks and Adversities
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0393702324/>
by M. Katz , Ph.D.

Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0801480183/>
by E. Werner & R. Smith

Raising Resilient Children
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0809297647/>
by Robert Brooks, Ph.D. and Sam Goldstein, Ph.D.

Nurturing Resilience in Our Children
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0658021109/>
By Sam Goldstein, Ph.D. and Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

Changing Adult Behavior

Books

Do One Thing Different
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0688177948/>
by Bill O'Hanlon and William Hudson O'Hanlon

Raising Resilient Children
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0809297647/>
By Sam Goldstein, Ph.D. and Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

The Self-Esteem Teacher
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0886714184/>
by Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

On the Web

Quiz — Parenting: Paving the Way for Kids to Change
<http://www.schwablearning.org/quiz.asp?q=7>

Resources

Fostering Self-Esteem — Strategies for Parents

Books

All Kinds of Minds

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0838820905/>

by Mel Levine, M.D.

Educational Care: A System For Understanding And Helping Children With Learning Problems At Home And In School

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0838819877/>

by Mel Levine, M.D.

Jarvis Clutch—Social Spy

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Keeping A Head In School

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Raising Resilient Children

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0809297647/>

By Sam Goldstein, PhD and Robert Brooks, PhD

Raising a Thinking Child

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0671534637/>

by Myrna B. Shure

Raising a Thinking Preteen

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0805059911/>

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