Promoting Self-Esteem in Young Children

I write this article in the wake of the Sandy Hook Massacre where 20 young children and 6 adults mindlessly lost their lives. Coming from a teaching background, owning nurseries and having a young baby, I will admit to trying not to watch too much of the coverage from Connecticut on TV, as it all seems to close to home. Memories of Dublane come flooding back and for me I was only a bystander. From the small amount of coverage I have watched, what struck me was the confidence demonstrated by all the young children whose lives are now being mourned and celebrated. One such girl was shown singing a hymn whilst her brother played the piano – she looked happy and self-assured which brings us onto this edition’s article...promoting self-esteem in young children.

Over the weekend, I am sure anyone with children would have given their little one an extra cuddle or told them loved them just one more time. My husband and I work closely with Clyde One’s Cash for Kids and during a recent conversation I was astounded to hear that they have 98,000 children in Glasgow and the West who need individual funding, this does not include community groups and nowadays alot of this money is for basic supplies of food, not even luxuries. One of the Cash for Kids team members was discussing with me how she tries to explain about the fundraising to her own children and she tells them that they know they are loved unconditionally, however for many children who live close to us, some only know they are loved either some of the time, for part of the day, part of the week and ofcourse there are some children who do not know they are loved – something many of us cannot comprehend. For me, this begins the journey of promoting self-esteem in our children, we do it by the way in which in which we nurture, care and demonstrate our love.

Studies show that only 15% of us have sufficient self-esteem to enable us to achieve our dreams and research tells us that our futures are shaped by our early childhood experiences. So what is self-esteem? According to the dictionary self-esteem means ‘belief and confidence in your own ability and value’. Self-esteem changes as a child grows based on their experiences and perceptions. As mum, dads, family members and/or people who work directly with children, we should never underestimate the impact or indeed profound effect we can have on the lives of children.

Children who grow up with healthy self-esteem are better equipped to face challenges in their life; they know their strengths and weaknesses, whilst generally feeling good about themselves. Something that we must remember is the degree to which a child feels accepted by adults and peers is important in developing their self-esteem. Self-esteem is created within but is largely influenced by the people children come into close contact with. For those of us who are moulding our young people’s thoughts, we should remember that we are not born with self-esteem it is learned, with this in mind we should always be aware of what children are ‘learning’ from our example.

As adults, we can hopefully recall times when we felt safe, secure, special, worthwhile, successful, that we had achieved or that we had made a difference – these positive experiences satisfy our basic emotional needs and therefore make us feel good about ourselves. We need to use these memories to start building self-esteem in all the young children we come into contact with, but most importantly with our own children.

Ways to increase children’s self-esteem:

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• Use praise or empowering words as often as possible with your children. Praise helps to build self-confidence. (Thanks for being honest/You did your best/I believe in you/Well done/Great answer/You are the best)

• Give children compliments as often as possible, we take a lot of things our children do for granted, so reinforce the behaviours you want to see.

• Notice when children do something special and acknowledge it (this could be taking their first steps, doing well in a test, learning to ride a bike, showing good manners etc)

• Recognise and point out their good choices and decisions, all too often we focus on the negative (‘I’m so pleased you tidied your room’, rather than saying ‘It was about time that you had tidied that room’)

• Avoid making children part of a joke or putting them down – children often believe this negativity and this can seriously contribute to low self-esteem (e.g. your not good enough to play in the football team, you are never going to learn how to walk all you do is crawl)

• Do not compare your children, this can cause sibling resentment and one child feeling they are inadequate.

When we communicate with children there are some things that help boost their self-esteem and the main one is to actively listen to your children. In today’s world with so many technological distractions – mobile phones, IPads, TVs, laptops - this makes active listening ever more difficult to conquer. Active listening is a skill that many adults even in working life have not yet mastered, however these tips will help and should be encouraged for use even with the youngest of children:

• Speak encouragingly (‘Tell me more/Can you describe ...’)

• Ask for clarification (‘Help me understand what you meant...’)

• Retell/summarise key parts of the discussion (‘Tell me if I heard you right...’)

• Reflect (‘It seems you are feeling’)

• Show genuine interest by use of body language (lean forward and use eye contact)

• Empathise by trying to understand the child’s thoughts and feelings

Easy hints for Building Self-Esteem:

• Help a child plan something
• Help a child identify and explore a hobby
• Be available when children need you
• Promote children’s learning of personal hygiene
• Answer children’s questions with honesty
• Respect the needs of children
• Use positive reinforcement through positive use of phrases/language
• Do something together with your child
• Do something to make your child feel special on a regular basis (this could be as simple as story-time together every evening)

It goes without saying that self-esteem starts to form at birth and becomes the armour that children use in later life. We must not forget that building positive self-esteem takes time and needs maintained – that goes for us adults too!

“We worry about what a child will become tomorrow, yet we forget that he is someone today.”
~ Stacia Tauscher

We need to start building positive self-esteem in our children now, so that we prepare them in their formative years for believing in themselves for the future.