

Self-Esteem is Crucial for Children with Disabilities

By Joel Desotelle, OTR/L

Whether a child suffers from an emotional, physical, cognitive, or behavioral disability, self-esteem is critical to a child's success.

Regardless of a child's age or cognitive ability, he or she is keenly aware of the differences between his/her abilities and those of other children or siblings, and the expectations of parents. Because a child may require extra help or modifications to their environment, the presence of these aids is a constant reminder of their difficulties.

To compound matters, many children with disabilities are unwilling to participate in activities that would benefit them because they are insecure, embarrassed, or lack confidence in their skills, perceived or real. This takes away opportunities to realize and develop the skills they need to be successful, which stunts their overall growth and development even further!

Environments such as school, therapy, home and social settings can either promote or hinder a child's perception of him or herself. Recognizing and understanding the importance of a child's self-esteem is necessary to optimize overall physical, social, and emotional development.

Give Positive Reinforcement

Many ordinary activities are difficult for a child with disabilities, and helping them can challenge our patience and ability to problem-solve. This can be especially true with daily tasks, such as dressing and brushing teeth. It's easy to grow frustrated with a child who requires extra time or struggles with these and

similar tasks. As a result, we may unintentionally send negative messages to the child. Children are aware of these messages and often respond by performing poorly or being unwilling to perform at all out of fear of failure. As a compensatory strategy to guarantee success and approval, children become dependent on others to help them. This creates a co-dependency relationship that doesn't give a child the opportunity to develop his or her own skills. And it doesn't give you the freedom that comes with a child who can do things for him or herself.

Empower Children and Celebrate Successes

When we work or live with a child with a disability, we often make assumptions about what the child can and can't do. As a result, we do too much, stealing valuable opportunities for the child to develop and learn. I have worked with dozens of parents who have told me "I didn't even realize he could do that by himself!" after they observe a therapy session.

Empowering a child tells them "I trust you, I trust your skills." This fuels their self-esteem ten-fold and makes them feel like an accepted contributor to the family or classroom. It also gives them confidence to try new things, and the patience to work through more difficult tasks.

It's also very important to celebrate every success, big or small, and not scrutinize a child's failures or shortcomings. Children often respond to and remember negative comments more easily than positive ones. Yet they are starved for positive feedback and approval to fuel their self-esteem and self-worth. We need to offer as much positive feedback as we can to help a disabled child to grow and be more successful in their daily activities. Greater self-esteem produces more opportunities to perform beneficial tasks, which allows a child to see first-hand what they are capable of accomplishing!

Guarantee Success/Grade the Task

One of the reasons we tend to take away responsibility is because a child may not have the skills to complete the entire task on their own, so we do it for them. Try “grading” the task so that they can at least do part of it. This gives a child the opportunity to use and develop important skills, and to work or play with you on a social level, which reinforces their feelings of acceptance.

Learning how to grade a task is not always easy. You need to first understand what skill level they are functioning at and find the “just right challenge.” In other words, you need to change how easy or hard a task is so that the child can be successful at a level he or she is capable of. You have to gauge this “just right” level as you work or play with them, being sure to challenge, but not frustrate them.

Working with an occupational therapist or a similar professional can help you define these challenges. I do this on a daily basis with all of my parents. The key goal is to find a way to get the child involved, even if it means that all they are doing is holding the instructions or the toolbox. Be aware of how much you are helping! It is so easy to take over and help too much, but if you are able to find that “just right challenge,” the value to the child’s self-esteem is immeasurable.

Children Need Time

We live in a rushed society that requires everything be done immediately. This is difficult for kids with disabilities. They are capable of doing a lot of things if they just have the time! I have been told by hundreds of parents that they haven’t complied to a specific home program because they “don’t have the time.” Being

a busy parent of three children myself, I understand this notion, but it is also important to recognize that giving a child time to participate and complete an activity is an investment in his or her self-esteem and overall function. This also has a snowball effect on the child's growth and development: more opportunity, more skills, more self-esteem, greater compliance and motivation, and more opportunities!

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