***Psychology Today* Article: Adolescence and Self-Esteem**

Published on September 6, 2010 by [Carl E. Pickhardt, Ph.D.](http://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/carl-e-pickhardt-phd) in [Surviving (Your Child's) Adolescence](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/surviving-your-childs-adolescence)

[](http://www.psychologytoday.com/node/3165)

**Carl Pickhardt, Ph.D.**, is a psychologist in Austin, Texas. His most recent books are: *The Connected Father*, *The Future of Your Only Child*, and *Stop Screaming*.

The concept of self-esteem is a very American one, particularly at home in our culture during the century that has followed its invention by psychologist William James.

Perhaps justified as part of our right to the pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment, rooted in our emphasis on individualism, and nourished by our belief in self-improvement and material success, self-esteem is a notion that seems here to stay.

In addition, it has a certain common sense appeal and validity, if not a scientifically verifiable one. Given a choice, most people would rather have high self-esteem than low because they link it to personal well being and effectiveness.

From my view in family counseling, self-esteem can have significant impact on relationships. It generally seems that family members are more prone to act badly toward each other when they are feeling bad about themselves. The worse they feel about themselves, the worse they often treat others, the worse they get treated in return, the worse they end up feeling about themselves, the worse they treat others, and round and round the cycle of unhappiness goes. In low-esteem families, relationships can become mutually destructive.

In high esteem families, however, the reverse seems more likely to occur. The better family members feel about themselves, the better they treat each other, the better they get treated in return, the better off everyone tends to become. In high esteem families, relationships can become mutually affirming. Members seem more inclined to bring out the best in each other, not the worst.

So positive self-esteem is not some kind of popular fad or new-age frill. Upon its existence, the happy and healthy functioning of individuals and families partly depend, particularly during children's teenage years.

I have seen two major self-esteem drops during the normal course of adolescence.

The first drop occurs at the outset in early adolescence (ages 9-13) when the young person's separation from childhood creates a loss of contentment with being defined and treated any longer as just a child. In this process, many components of self-definition now considered "childish" - beloved interests, activities, and relationships that supported self-esteem - may be sacrificed for the sake of future growth and acting older. A lot of "kid stuff" of significant psychological value can be thrown away. Old toys and hobbies can be abandoned, and even cherished grandparents can be put at a distance.

The second drop in self-esteem occurs during the end of adolescence, trial independence (ages 18-23), when the young person is confronted with the daunting reality of independence and feels overwhelmed and diminished by the future shock mentioned in my previous blog. Feeling not up to this challenge and sometimes acting this way, it is easy to feel disappointed in them selves, to get down on them selves, and even to punish them selves, esteem falling in the process. "Here I am 22 years old, still messing up, and I can't get my life together!"

So what is self-esteem? It is not real in the sense that it can be visually examined, physically touched, or directly observed. Similar to notions like ‘intelligence' or ‘conscience', self-esteem is an abstract psychological concept made up to describe part of a person's human nature. It's existence and utility is inferred through actions and expressions considered evidence of its presence.

Just as solving a problem may be considered evidence of intelligence, or acting in accord with one's ethical beliefs may be considered evidence of conscience, insisting on being dealt with fairly or respectfully may be considered evidence of self-esteem, the young person acting as though they are worth treating well.

More specifically, "self-esteem" is two words compounded into one. Separate them, and the meaning of the larger term comes clear. "Self" is a descriptive concept: By what specific characteristics do I identify who I am? "Esteem" is an evaluative concept: How do I judge the value of who I am?   
Self-esteem has to do with how a person identifies and evaluates his or her definition of self.   
 Start with self-esteem as identification. When the adolescent commits his or her identity to just one part of life - to having friends, to competitive sports, to high academic achievement - then when friends are lost, when injury ends athletics, when academic performance drops, esteem comes crashing down. "I'm nothing without my friends!" "I'm worthless without my sport!" "I'm a failure if I don't make an A!" To maintain relative constancy of well being through the normal ups and downs of adolescence, it really helps to have multiple pillars of self-esteem.

Consider self-esteem as evaluation. When the adolescent is routinely hard on him or herself - from insisting on excellence, from criticizing failings, from punishing mistakes - then when expectations are unmet, when imperfections become apparent, when human errors occur, esteem comes crashing down. "I'm so stupid!" "What's wrong with me!" "I can't do anything right!" To maintain constancy of well being during the trials of adolescence, it really helps when life goes badly to treat oneself with tolerance and understanding.

Particularly in the response to a bad experience where impulsive or unwise decision making led to error, disappointment, or trouble, an adolescent can get into some pretty harsh self-evaluation, descending common steps that systematically lower self-esteem.

They are:  
Make a bad choice,   
Suffer hurt feelings,  
Take burden of guilt,   
Self-criticize or blame,   
Punish self for acting badly,   
Treat this mistreatment as deserved,   
Spend more energy on penance than recovery.

Should your son or daughter proceed to beat up on themselves for choosing unwisely or for life going badly, you might suggest this to them: "To hurt yourself when you are already hurting only makes the hurt worse. When you're hurting is a time not to treat yourself badly, but well. That way you can motivate yourself to do better."

So what might you say to your adolescent about self-esteem? "The more narrowly you define yourself and the more negatively you evaluate yourself, the more at risk of lowered self-esteem you are likely to be. In that unhappy state, you may also be more at risk of treating yourself and others badly. Therefore, do yourself a favor. To maintain positive self-esteem, define yourself broadly and evaluate yourself kindly and most of the time you will appreciate the value, and enjoy the company, of who and how you are."

Is there such a thing as having too much self-esteem? Yes. People who prize themselves too highly often believe they are superior, are always right, are owed special consideration and treatment, need allow no disagreement, know it all (or at least all worth knowing), deserve be given their way, and should be allowed to rule over the lives of others. Many tyrants, petty and great, from the entitled child to the cruel despot, have had extremely high self-esteem -- to other people's cost.

Within the matrix of concepts that explain psychological functioning, I believe self-esteem has a useful place. Important as it is, however, strong self-esteem is not everything.

For example, it is independent of morality. Strong self-esteem does not prevent wrongdoing. People who feel extremely positive about who and how they are can still become bullies, criminals, and even destructive zealots. Evil can claim strong self-esteem as easily as can good.

Self-esteem is also independent of outcome. It does not assure accomplishment. People who feel confident about performing well are still capable of making misunderstandings, miscalculations, and mistakes. Strong self-esteem can lead a person into failure as well as to success.

My favorite prescription for preserving strong self-esteem was reported in the New York Times a number of years ago (September 28, 1999, p. C31.) "There's a lot of talk about self-esteem these days...It seems pretty basic to me. If you want to feel proud of yourself, you've got to do things you can feel proud of. Feelings follow actions."

This statement was made by Oseola McCarty, a washerwoman who gave her life savings of $150,000 to fund scholarships at the University of Southern Mississippi.